

The Evolution of the Japanese Period Film

Jidaigeki from 1997 to 2012

Vibeke Oseth Gustavsen



Master's thesis (60 credits)

Asian and African Studies – Japanese

Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages
University of Oslo

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Abstract

The purpose of this master thesis is to investigate the Japanese period film, also known by its Japanese term *jidaigeki*, and to find out how it has evolved in terms of narrative patterns, style conventions and genre formulas in the last fifteen years. While English-language research in the field of Japanese film studies has tended to concentrate on earlier period film productions, particularly by world-known masters such as Kurosawa Akira, Inagaki Hiroshi, Kobayashi Masaki, Gosha Hideo and others, there is still a need to examine newer films in this genre. The focus of this thesis is therefore on a selection of nine recent *jidaigeki* released between 1997 and 2011; films that ranked among the top ten movies of the year by *Kinema Junpō* and/or had a domestic box office gross of JPY 15 billion. This was done to ensure that the films analyzed had either been of critical interest or had attained a certain success in movie theaters in Japan. The objective is to analyze and compare these recent productions with earlier narrative patterns and subgenres of the Japanese period film to find out if there is a relation between contemporary and earlier cinematic codes within the *jidaigeki* genre.

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1 Introduction

There is still a need to examine newer films in the Japanese period film genre (*jidaigeki*). A considerable number of academic sources in English exist on the topic, but researchers have so far tended to concentrate on earlier Japanese period film productions that were successfully exported to Western countries in the post-World War II period. Recognized scholars on Japanese cinema such as Donald Richie, Iwamoto Kenji, David Desser, Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, David Bordwell, Darrell William Davis and others have analyzed these earlier films directed by world-renowned Japanese masters such as Kurosawa Akira (1910-1998), Inagaki Hiroshi (1905-1980), Kobayashi Masaki (1916-1996), Gosha Hideo (1929-1992) and other filmmakers in various theoretical and academic contexts. The analytical data from earlier *jidaigeki* are therefore derived from these secondary sources.¹

In the research for this thesis, few in-depth academic English-language sources have been found on the most recent *jidaigeki* productions and their position within a greater genre history. An exception to this rule is Sybil Anne Thornton's 2008 book *The Japanese Period Film: A Critical Analysis*, although Thornton's analysis is narrowed down to Yamada Yōji's *The Twilight Samurai* (*Tasogare Seibei*, 2002) and *The Hidden Blade* (*Kakushi ken oni no tsume*, 2004), the two first films of his samurai trilogy. What I initially found problematic with some of her arguments in the book is that she proposes a relationship between the past and present narrative tradition of the Japanese period film that is only explained in terms of the “distinctiveness” and “exclusiveness” of Japanese cinematic style: “The most recent generation of American film scholars and critics have assumed, certainly on the basics of film language and film techniques, that there is little difference between American and Japanese cinema.”² This is reminiscent of the ideas of Donald Richie, widely known for his analysis of Japanese cinema. Richie was one of many English-language critics and historians on Japanese film in the 1950s and 1960s whose motivation was to discover the ‘Japanese-ness’ of Japanese cinema and at the same time to argue for its “international application as a form

¹ A note on Japanese names and film titles: Throughout the thesis, all Japanese names are given in Japanese order: the family name followed by the given name. When the person has published in English, such as Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, the given name appears first. Further references will only use the family name, unless the full name is required for supplementary explanations. When mentioned for the first time, film titles will be presented like this: *English title* (*Japanese title*). Further references will adhere to the English language title.

² S.A. Thornton, *The Japanese Period Film: A Critical Analysis* (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland, 2008), 3-4.

of humanist cultural expression.”³ In combination with the increasing spread of Japanese films at international film festivals, and in small movie houses such as cinemathèques and art-house cinemas in Western countries, Richie’s work assisted in communicating a sense of how Japanese cinema could reveal “national character.” The significance of “national character” had a double meaning. First, it could be related to the issue of how Japan needed to be established as a “good neighbor” to the West in the post-war era after the country had acted as an imperialist aggressor during the fourteen years from the September 1931 Manchuria Incident to the Japanese capitulation in August 1945.⁴ Second, the significance of “national character” also contributed to the institutional growth and development of film studies as an object of “serious scholarly concern”.⁵ In recent years, however, Richie’s ideas of film style have broadened and now he admits that he is not so confident anymore that “such a thing as national character can be said to exist.”⁶

Thornton disagrees with Richie’s revised thoughts regarding “national character” and she justifies her view of a unique Japanese cinematic style in terms of Japanese history and culture, and states that there is more to consider in a film than film techniques. I must agree with Thornton on this point. As a student in the field of East Asian studies, I believe history and culture are important frameworks of understanding film, to understand its “how’s” and “why’s” in a larger context, as long as the methods of operation are not understood exclusively as belonging to a distinct and isolated national narrative tradition. Yet this is what Thornton seems to be suggesting. The film technical side to, and the statistical data of Japanese films are also valuable to consider if we are to understand, as well as helping others to understand, Japanese cinema as something else, something more, than just a product and result of cultural and historical circumstances. For this reason I will, to a certain extent, consider such issues as the successes and failures of the Japanese film studios, the introduction of the television to Japan, domestic box office numbers, and critical reception from *Kinema Junpō*, Japan’s oldest, and possibly most influential and renowned film magazine. If we essentialize Japanese cinema as exotic and unique, even a seemingly

³ Alastair Phillips and Julian Stringer, “Introduction”, in *Japanese cinema: Texts and contexts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 10.

⁴ The Manchuria Incident refers to the Japanese invasion of the region of Manchuria in northeast China, then the establishment of the puppet state of Manchukuo. The so-called ‘Fifteen-Year War’ (1931-1945) was one of the bleakest chapters in Japanese history. Japan terrorized the people of China, performed a surprise attack against the US Navy at Pearl Harbor in December 1941, invaded and conquered most of Southeast Asia, and fought an atrocious war against the allied forces.

⁵ Phillips and Stringer, “Introduction,” 10.

⁶ Donald Richie, quoted in Thornton, *The Japanese Period Film: A Critical Analysis*, 3- 4.

indigenous, traditional genre such as the *jidai-geki*, we distance ourselves from it. It will be reduced to, and dismissed as a field of study that ultimately cannot, and will not be comprehended. Still, it is not necessarily Thornton's intention to essentialize the Japanese period film by arguing the way she does, but it seems a rather narrow perspective.

This thesis will offer an analysis of nine recent representative Japanese period films released between 1997 and 2012. The objective is to connect these contemporary productions, through analysis and comparison, with their film historical and film cultural past by examining aspects of narrative structures, genre formulas and style conventions to find out if there is a relation between contemporary and earlier cinematic codes within the *jidaigeki* genre. On a subordinate level, I will also look into a few of the technical aspects of these newer *jidaigeki* to find possible developments, variations and/or similarities from earlier productions within the genre. Where this thesis stands out from previous work in the field of Japanese film studies, is that the topic I have chosen will not be discussed mainly through an analysis of older productions of Japanese period films, I will rather use earlier *jidaigeki* narrative structures, subgenres and technical aspects as examples to illustrate critical film analytical points. My focus will lie with the contemporary Japanese period film, and to argue for its continuity in the 21st century.

1.1 Thesis structure

The thesis consists of six chapters; this first introductory chapter, a historical framework of Japanese film in chapter two, moving on to *jidaigeki* developments up until the postwar years in chapter three, continuing with the analysis of the nine recent *jidaigeki* films in chapter four, proceeding with a discussion of genre evolution in chapter five, before ending with the conclusion in chapter six.

Following this section, this chapter will contain a presentation of the thesis' research question and the research method and also a note of what to be aware of when writing about Japan and Japanese cinema from a Western point of view. In order to analyze and discuss recent *jidaigeki*, it is essential to first provide a general overview of Japanese film history with special attention to the Japanese period film, which I will deal with in chapter two. I will start from the humble beginnings of *jidaigeki* in Japanese theater, through the decades and up until the present time. To add a more economical perspective to the Japanese film historical

overview, I will include some sections about the success and failures of Japanese film studios, and recent box office numbers and statistics. In chapter three, I will look at *jidaigeki* developments; main narrative patterns, genre iconography and subgenres from the prewar and postwar era. In chapter four, I will give an analysis of my selection of nine recent *jidaigeki* genre films and analyze and compare them within the framework of narrative, genre and style, and film technical features within areas of cinematography and *mise-en-scène*.⁷ I have my selection of recent *jidaigeki* films on the basis of domestic box office lists and critics' lists: the films that did best in Japanese movie theaters and the films that received critical acclaim on yearly top ten lists by the recognized Japanese film magazine *Kinema Junpō*. In chapter five, I will discuss *jidai-geki* genre evolution; how the image of the samurai is changing, how the nine contemporary period films bend and rework genre codes and how *jidai-geki* films may be relevant for a younger audience. I will also present a brief update of the current status of *jidaigeki*. Is the genre still viable? In chapter six, I will give my concluding arguments. What can be read out of the analysis? As far as the nine example films chosen for analysis are concerned, do contemporary Japanese period films share any genre characteristics and codes with older period film productions? If they do, what has changed and what is new? In the appendices section, I have gathered the information of the box office lists and film critics' list from which I have drawn my data.

1.2 Research question

The main research question of this thesis is: How has the Japanese period film genre, the *jidaigeki*, evolved in the last fifteen years? By looking at film analytical aspects of narrative structure, style conventions and genre formulas, as well as a limited range of film technical aspects within cinematography and *mise-en-scène*, the thesis will examine *jidaigeki* and its genre history, with focus on changes coming from the prewar and postwar periods, and up to present-day. The thesis will concentrate on a selection of nine recent period films released between 1997 and 2012 and will provide an analysis and a discussion of these recent productions from the above-mentioned period. I will compare the films to find out whether the characteristics and codes of the genre are still present. In what ways have *jidaigeki* films

⁷ In a film, *mise-en-scène* is *what* is filmed and its arrangement; it is everything that appears before the camera, on screen. In practical terms, when applied to cinema, it refers to the design aspects of a film such as composition, sets, props, actors, costumes, sound, and lighting. Cinematography is *how* it is filmed: the technique of movie photography, including both the shooting and the development of the film. Several aspects contribute to the art of cinematography, including: film stocks, filters, lenses, depth of field and focus, lighting, camera movements, and framing. (David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 9th edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 118, 167).

changed and developed through the decades in terms of narrative structures, genre formulas and style conventions? In which sense are these contemporary films different and/or similar from older *jidaigeki* from the prewar and postwar periods, and how can the new ones be said to have changed genre codes? This thesis will base its findings and conclusion upon period film productions of the past fifteen years (1997-2012) to analyze and exemplify how the Japanese period film genre has evolved since the prewar era. It relies on the “Top ten Japanese movies of the year” lists from 1997 to 2012 in *Kinema Junpō*, as well as on domestic box office lists from the same period. The *Kinema Junpō* annual top ten film lists are a result of Japanese critics who poll to select the ten best films of the year. Their preference has the greatest authority among the public and within the industry itself.⁸

1.3 Research method

There exists an abundance of academic sources in English on earlier *jidaigeki*, particularly the movies that were successfully exported to Western countries. In the research to this thesis, however, I have found few in-depth academic English-language sources on the most recent *jidaigeki*. As a result, I have chosen a more statistical approach: the selection of films I have chosen for comparison and analysis are films that have placed among the top ten films of the year by *Kinema Junpō* and/or had a domestic box office gross of JPY 15 billion.⁹ The reason for using only statistical data from the box office and *Kinema Junpō* lists, and the reason for drawing the line at box office gross JPY 15 billion for the selected box office films, is that these data will not be random. Thus, the films analyzed have either been of critical interest in Japan or have had a certain success in the movie theaters. The focus of my thesis is thus narrowed down, and furthermore I will not consider animation (*anime*) movies, children’s movies or TV-series that may be regarded as *jidaigeki*. In addition to considering the standards and formulas of the *jidaigeki* genre, I would have had to consider other applicable genre-specific codes and formulas, which is outside the limits of this thesis. The box office records and critics’ lists I have used for research are attached in the appendices section, and by looking at them, it should be clear by the sheer number of films that are listed why such specific restrictive measures are necessary. The limitation also implies that the selected films cannot be regarded as representative for Japanese cinema as a whole, but they

⁸ Joseph L. Anderson and Donald Richie, *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry (expanded edition)* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982), 52.

⁹ Japanese Yen. JPY 15 billion = 149,01 million US dollars. JPY 10 = USD 1,00. USD 10 = JPY 1000,6 (Currency numbers are approximate, and of May, 2013).

will at least show if there is a relation between recent Japanese cinema and traditional Japanese cinema aesthetics within the limitations of the *jidai-geki* genre. The objective is to see how theoretical studies of previous Japanese period films relate to the contemporary Japanese period films chosen for analysis in this thesis.

When choosing films from the box office lists, I drew the line for the Japanese box office gross at JPY 15 billion as a minimum income and I will compare these films with those designated as yearly favorites by the critics in the film magazine *Kinema Junpō*. Thus I have come up with the following selection of films: *Samurai Fiction (SF: Episode One)*, Nakano Hiroyuki, 1998), *Gohatto*¹⁰ (Ōshima Nagisa, 1999), *Gojoe: Spirit War Chronicle (Gojo: reisenki)*, Ishii Sōgo, 2000), *The Twilight Samurai (Tasogare Seibei)*, Yamada Yōji, 2002), *Zatoichi*¹¹ (*Zatōichi*, Kitano Takeshi, 2003), *The Hidden Blade (Kakushi ken oni no tsume)*, Yamada Yōji, 2004), *13 Assassins (Jūsan-nin no shikaku)*, Miike Takashi, 2010), *Abacus and Sword (Bushu no kakeibo)*, Morita Yoshimitsu, 2010) and *Scabbard Samurai (Saya-zamurai)*, Matsumoto Hitoshi, 2010). Yamada Yōji's *Samurai Trilogy* received good ratings both in the box office and in the *Kinema Junpō* lists, and since the films in the trilogy are variations over the same theme and narrative, based on novels and short story anthologies by author Fujisawa Shūhei, I have included two of the films in the trilogy for the purpose of comparison.

To analyze a film involves examining one film (or more), from a particular perspective, with a particular theory or method. An analysis examines and discusses different parts of the film based on a (research) question or subject in a certain way (methodology), often in the context of a theory. To write complete analyses of the nine films would not only have been superfluous but also impossible within the timeframe allotted to writing this thesis. The key is to limit the analysis and make choices. The four central film analytical focal points in this thesis are: narrative, genre/style, *mise-en-scène* and cinematography. This thesis will analyze a number of films within one overarching genre, the *jidaigeki*, and therefore I will, in relation to the developments in the genre, go through the similarities and differences of the nine films as well as possible aspects of genre evolution with the film analytical focal points as common denominators and points of reference.

¹⁰ *Gohatto* was released in several English-speaking countries under its Japanese title and this is the title I will use. Otherwise, the film is also known in English as *Taboo*.

¹¹ *Zatoichi* was released in some English-speaking countries under the title *The Blind Swordsman: Zatoichi*, but for the sake of convenience I will use the simplified title *Zatoichi*.

1.4 Japanese cinema from a Western point of view – the dangers of cinematic ethnocentrism and essentialism

It is interesting to note that one of the most prevailing traditions within the 1960s humanist criticism discourse on Japanese cinema is the focus on the previously mentioned “national character” as a distinguishing feature and establishing factor in analysis and interpretation of Japanese cinema. As earlier mentioned, the works of Donald Richie can serve to exemplify this. Yoshimoto calls it an unfortunate situation in which stereotypes of the Japanese national character and cultural essence are used to explain different aspects of Japanese film such as thematic motifs, narrative patterns, formal features and contextual backgrounds. In Western scholarship on Japanese cinema of today, the Japanese are often portrayed as one, homogenous group often referred to as the “Japanese mind.” (“To the Japanese mind, the self-sacrificing hero is the most admirable hero of all.”)¹² Yoshimoto continues with various sentences of similar valorizations of the Japanese national character, some of them written by David Desser and taken from his article “Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film” of 1992. Desser’s 1992 article will be frequently used and referenced in this thesis (and so will Yoshimoto’s own book *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema* from 2000) and it is rather common, even today, for Western journalistic film criticism and American film scholarship to make sweeping and essentialist statements on Japanese culture and cinema.¹³

It is of vital importance when writing about any topic connected with other cultures and traditions to strive to have an objective point of view, to do all you can to use cultural relativism rather than ethnocentrism as a method of analysis and criticism. This presents a challenge to the writer, especially because there is an actual danger of being caught in the pitfall of cinematic ethnocentrism and essentialism. When encountering Japan and Japanese cinema, many people, both film critics, scholars and students, have a tendency to “exotify” and essentialize (to focus on the “exotic” and to search for a collective Japanese “essence”)

¹² David Desser, “Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film,” in *Reframing Japanese Cinema: Authorship, Genre, History*, edited by Arthur Nalletti, Jr. and David Desser (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 147.

¹³ Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa: Film studies and Japanese cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 10-11; See for instance Gary G. Xu’s chapter “Remaking East Asia, Outsourcing Hollywood”, in *East Asian Cinemas: Exploring Transnational Connections on Film*, edited by Leon Hunt and Leung Wing-Fai (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 191-202. On page 193-194, Xu criticizes Orientalist views and overtones among some film critics and film industry “insiders”, and he comments upon the so-called “Asian aesthetic” that makes Asian films attractive to American audiences.

and thereby situate Japan as a “different” country. Moreover, many Western critics and historians put too little emphasis on how the movies that they have analyzed and discussed have been received in Japan. The result is an “us” versus “them” dichotomy, which is something I will avoid as much as I can. At the same time, however, it is critical to stress the fact that there will perhaps always be a cultural bias when studying other geographical areas of the world and their cultures, languages, religions, traditions and so forth. Earlier, I mentioned Thornton’s ideas of how it actually can prove valuable to understand films from a historical and cultural context rather than by means of film technical methods. These are two very different points of departure within film analysis, but both of them can prove to be equally beneficial. It is nevertheless outside the scope of this thesis to go into a more in-depth discussion of terms such as ethnocentrism and cultural relativism within the field of Japanese cinema. It makes for an entire new and interesting thesis on its own.¹⁴

¹⁴ See for instance Gary Needham, “Japanese cinema and orientalism”, in *Asian cinemas: A reader and guide*. By Dimitris Eleftheriotis and Gary Needham. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006: 8-16.

2 Historical framework

In my analysis of nine recent contributions to the Japanese period film genre, I will build upon changes and developments of narrative structure, genre/style and a few technological aspects that the *jidaigeki* has experienced through the years. To do this, it is first necessary to provide an introduction of the historical development of the Japanese film, with special attention given to the evolution of the Japanese period film within a Japanese film historical context, from its early beginnings in Japanese theater until the present day. The research of this thesis, based on Japanese *jidaigeki* from 1997 to 2012, consisted of collecting statistical data from box office rankings and from the Japanese film magazine *Kinema Junpo*'s yearly top ten lists. For that reason, in this chapter I will also include some essential Japanese film industrial history, including censorship and suppression of the period film, the successes and failures of the influential Japanese film studios, audience demands, movie theater attendance, the introduction of the television and a few recent developments in domestic box office, market share and film politics. A more elaborate account of *jidaigeki* developments from the prewar and postwar periods will be examined in chapter three, while the latest modifications will be dealt with in the analysis in chapter four.

2.1 The classification into two mega-genres

The division into *jidaigeki* and *gendai geki* (stories about contemporary life) in Japan is of the utmost significance and is reflected “in the directorial system, the star system, and even the physical structure of film studios.”¹⁵ It is now a common agreement between film studios, filmmakers, reviewers, critics, and audiences in Japan, to have a general distinction of Japanese film releases by sorting them into one of the two broad categories that developed from the connection between theater and film: the *jidaigeki* or the *gendai geki*. The year 1868 marks the historical division for this periodical line, the year of the political upheaval of the so-called Meiji Restoration or, rather, Meiji Revolution. The Meiji government became known for its modernization of Japan and for its adaptation of Western technology and material culture. Hence, *jidaigeki* and *gendai geki* can be argued not to be genres or textual disciplines as such, but rather labels that point to the historical period (feudal or modern) in which the film story is placed. Although a *jidaigeki* refers to a story set in an historical era, it

¹⁵ Yoshimoto, Kurosawa: *Film studies and Japanese cinema*, 208.

does not necessarily deal with a samurai character or depict swordplay. Samurai cinema is now often termed *chanbara* (onomatopoeia describing the sound of swords clashing), literally sword fighting movies, and is a subgenre of *jidaigeki*. The samurai film genre falls entirely within the overarching *jidaigeki* because the principles of this feudal class ends with the Meiji Restoration. However, qualities associated with the warrior, *bushi*, can sometimes be highlighted in *gendaigeki* as well. All *jidaigeki* are historical in setting and outlook, they highlight period detail and politics, and examine the lives of the different social classes in feudal Japan. In chapter three, I will come back to different narrative patterns and subgenres that emerged in *jidaigeki* in the prewar and postwar periods.¹⁶

While the system of classification into two mega-genres certainly has its benefits, one disadvantage is its propensity to be “prescriptive (how things ought to be) rather than descriptive (how things are)”, as Thornton explains.¹⁷ To summarize, Thornton describes the term *gendaigeki* as not being used for every contemporary life play produced in Japan since 1868, rather, the term “refers only to those films produced since the end of World War I, and strictly to films modeled on the light comedies and films about ordinary life of the West – especially of the United States.”¹⁸ Thornton also mentions the films of Inagaki as examples of history films rather than period films.¹⁹ Inagaki is famous for the Academy Award-winning *Samurai I: Musashi Miyamoto* (*Miyamoto Musashi*, 1954), the first film in his *Samurai trilogy* (1954-1956 (*Miyamoto Musashi I-III*)), and *Chushingura* (*Chūshingura: Hana no maki, yuki no maki*, 1962), as well as other period films. Inagaki himself regarded the *jidaigeki* genre as *gendaigeki* “with a samurai topknot” and like his mentor Itō Daisuke (1898-1981), Inagaki benefited greatly from all new cinematic techniques coming from the West.²⁰

There is a lack of agreement relating to what is considered a *gendaigeki* and a *jidaigeki*, but the terms have been retained if for nothing else than for their convenience. Thornton declares that using the term “samurai film”, rather than *jidaigeki* is not acceptable because not all the protagonists of all the films are samurai. Some texts about Japanese period films that I have

¹⁶ James Goodwin, *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema* (Baltimore, Maryland, and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 5-6; Thornton, *The Japanese Period Film: A Critical Analysis*, 13-14.

¹⁷ Thornton, *The Japanese Period Film: A Critical Analysis*, 13.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Donald Richie, *A hundred years of Japanese film* (Tokyo, New York and London: Kodansha International, 2005), 68-69.

listed as sources for this thesis, still use the term “samurai film” to set it apart from the overarching period film genre. In this paper I will therefore use the English term “period film” (and to a lesser extent, “samurai film”) and the related Japanese terms “*jidaigeki*” and “*chanbara*”.²¹

2.2 Connections to Japanese theater

While *jidaigeki* and *gendai geki* are indispensable for the structure of Japanese cinema today, the two genres did not exist early on in the history of Japanese cinema. The division between *kyūgeki* (*kyūha* for short) and *shinpageki* (*shinpa*)²² was the first generic distinction to be formed and later, they evolved into *jidaigeki* and *gendai geki* respectively. Fundamentally, *kyūgeki* was derived from *kabuki*.²³ The filmings of *kabuki* performances were the earliest instances of a Japanese cinema in the making, and these performances are what the *jidaigeki* later has evolved from. Early *kyūgeki*, or *kabuki* films, did not do anything to hide the stage; instead the theatrical performance style was deliberately highlighted. Thus, the *kabuki* films were to this extent considered a substitute for real *kabuki* performances and came to be regarded as “poor people’s theater.”²⁴

In addition, there was another theater form that would shape the period film in a greater sense than *kabuki* choreography, the Shinkokugeki (“new national drama”) School of popular theater, established in 1912. While the filmed *kabuki* performances had a slow and graceful choreography, what could be called the *shinkokugeki* style stood out with its realistic and athletic swordplay performances, a style that proved to be popular with the audience. Before long, choreography and actors from these popular theater productions were being used in film. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s Japanese film directors began to explore the full potential of the film medium, and thus narratives designed for the screen rather than for the stage gradually replaced the filmed *kabuki* performances.²⁵

²¹ Thornton, *The Japanese Period Film: A Critical Analysis*, 13-14.

²² *Kyūgeki* literally means “old drama”, while the similar term *kyūha* means “old school”. *Shinpageki* literally means “new drama”, while the similar term *shinpa* means “new school”.

²³ *Kabuki* is a traditional Japanese theater form and is characterized by its highly stylized and meticulously choreographed movements set to music and song.

²⁴ Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa: Film studies and Japanese cinema*, 208.

²⁵ Roland Thorne, *Samurai films* (Harpenden, Herts: Kamera Books, 2008), 33-34.

2.3 The 19010s, 1920s and 1930s – Cinematic supervision and the breaking of old conventions

Through the Meiji (1868-1912) and Taishō (1912-1926) governments an authoritarian government exerted control. By 1917, a film-control regulation law was utilized, and in 1925 its rigidities were further intensified. The 1939 law was patterned after the laws of the Nazi Spitzenorganisation der Filmwirtschaft (in English; the Film Industry Summit Organization). This law was instituted because of the militaristic and nationalistic political climate, which had become much stronger after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931-32, and the government's insistence on opinion control.²⁶ The search for “national autonomy” led to government regulation of the economy, but at first, filmmaking and other aspects of popular culture were somewhat exempted.²⁷ Despite the fact that cinematic supervision by the government quickly increased in frequency and rigorousness,²⁸ for the most part the genres that had flourished in the 1920s continued to be exploited.”²⁹

However, censorship and control were not the only features of Japanese cinema in the 1920s. The *kyūgeki* films were also reintroduced, only now without many of the *kabuki* elements that had characterized the earlier films. Makino Shōzō (1878-1929), regarded as a pioneering director of Japanese film, was the first director who imbued non-*kabuki* elements into his movies such as stories from the traditional oral Japanese storytelling form called *kōdan*, trick camera techniques et cetera. In the new style of these films, the fearless, adventurous hero played a vital part. The heroic protagonist in these movies would be in motion instead of the carefully planned moves in accordance with the *kabuki* stage, and his movements would be more realistic. The emphasis on “fast-paced, action-packed suspense” is apparently derived from American films and the name *chanbara* would set these movies apart from other *jidaigeki* since the *chanbara* broke with traditional Japanese aesthetics. The different subgenres of *jidaigeki*, such as *chanbara* will be further discussed in chapter three, before I will give recent examples in the analysis in chapter four.³⁰

²⁶ Richie, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film*, 92.

²⁷ Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 3rd edition (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 226.

²⁸ Richie, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film*, 92.

²⁹ Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 226.

³⁰ Keiko I. McDonald, *Reading a Japanese film: Cinema in context* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 4.

The year 1930 marked the coming of sound to Japanese cinema. The costs of filmmaking were tripled, but while directors were discouraged to take any risks in their projects, audiences wanted experimentation and companies challenged each other with presenting new trademark genres as well as making a profit in altering old ones. The Nikkatsu studio continued to cash in on its popular *jidaigeki*. Directors, such as Yamanaka Sadao and Inagaki, gave their period films a certain depth through depicting social settings in the late Tokugawa period with more serious undertones than earlier *jidaigeki*.³¹

2.3.1 From *kabuki* to *kōdan* – The pioneer Makino Shōzō

Makino Shōzō had a crucial role in the development of the form of period film as a director and later as a producer. In his first film from 1908, many of the elements that would shape the course of the *jidaigeki* genre were already discernible.³² When the *shinkokugeki* style appeared in 1917 it presented swordfights and violence more accurately than the dancelike duels of the *kyūgeki*. In turn, this created a kind of realism in the *jidaigeki* that was new to Japanese period film. Makino made one of the first of these new *jidaigeki*, based on a popular play from the Shinkokugeki School, *The Purple Hood: Woodblock Artist* (*Murasaki zokin: Ukiyoe-shi*, 1923). This film was essential in shaping the future of the period film genre, and it was this new apparent, if selective, realism of *jidaigeki* that most likely appealed to audiences. And compared to earlier period films, these films did indeed appear realistic. Makino had by now broken his collaboration with *kabuki* actor-turned-*jidaigeki* superstar Onoe Matsunosuke. Perhaps it was precisely because of his background in the highly stylized theater form of *kabuki* that Onoe's performances were not as emotional and "real" as with the new film heroes and their "determined jaws and defiant gazes".³³ The new heroes were taken from illustrations in popular novels and from serializations in newspapers and magazines. While the acting style in Japanese period films had become more realistic, the arrangement of the actors was still stage-oriented and heavily choreographed.³⁴

As the narrative aspects of cinema became more refined due to various new technological and stylistic developments, Makino saw the value of storytelling and moved away from

³¹ McDonald, *Reading a Japanese film: Cinema in context*, 4-5.

³² Lisa Spalding, "Period Films in the Prewar Era", edited by Arthur Nolletti, Jr. and David Desser, *Reframing Japanese Cinema: Authorship, Genre, History* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 132.

³³ Richie, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film*, 64-65.

³⁴ Ibid.

filming excerpted scenes from *kabuki*. The classical, intricate narratives of *kabuki* plays were not always the most suitable material for films in the 1920s and onwards since *kabuki*, in addition to sword fighting, showed samurai facing complex situations and moral dilemmas. Therefore, there was a stylistic shift away from *kabuki* as the main source material for the period film. The existing film techniques and cinematic representational forms at the time were simply too primitive and not always capable of perceiving the fine distinctions and elaborate emotional specters of *kabuki*, and the relatively young and cinematically inexperienced audience would not understand such complexities.³⁵ Makino instead changed his source material to *kōdan*, an oral storytelling tradition in Japan that would exert a major influence on the structure of these new *jidaigeki* with its “abbreviated statements, curt dialogue, and swift shifts of scene”.³⁶

The new sword-wielding hero was a true character with articulated facial gestures. He found his influences from American silent film stars such as William S. Hart (who later became one of the first great stars of the American western genre) and Douglas Fairbanks (who was best known for his swashbuckling roles in various silent films), and was a kind of nonconformist “kimonoed cowboy” in the words of Donald Richie, as personified by Mifune Toshirō (1920-1997) in several of Kurosawa’s movies, for instance *Yojimbo* (*Yōjinbō*, 1961). When famous period film actors such as Bandō Tsumasaburō (1901-1953) began playing this kind of samurai hero in 1924, it did not take long until the establishment of the image of the masterless samurai, the *rōnin*, as a courageous but tormented agitator. The Japanese term *tateyaku* has been taken from *kabuki* to identify this type of romanticized ideal warrior; samurai who are not only triumphant in battles but also smart and strong-willed, with a determined attitude.³⁷

2.4 World War II and the American Occupation years (1940-1952) – The suppression of period films

In the years before World War II, Japanese cinema was dominated by the *jidaigeki*. In the years during and following the war however, period films suffered greatly. In the same period there was also a shift away from the pure costume dramas of the pre-war era, and a greater

³⁵ Spalding, “Period Films in the Prewar Era”, 132-133.

³⁶ Richie, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film*, 65.

³⁷ Richie, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film*, 65-66.

significance was placed upon swordfights and samurai. With the presence of feudalism and a warrior caste, *jidaigeki* films would be interrelated with action. Most features in the genre are set in the Tokugawa period (1603-1868), a time with strong local authorities, rising social turmoil and national isolationism.

The World War II militaristic Japanese government, who regarded *jidaigeki* as an inadequate form of entertainment, suppressed these films. Period films were also suppressed after Japan's defeat in World War II and the resulting American occupation of the country. Japanese cinema was under the close scrutiny of the American censors, who at once started controlling the film industry. The American post-war occupation army (SCAP) essentially banned *jidaigeki* films and any film that encouraged or approved of feudal loyalty and openly or subtly approved of suicide was prohibited. These restrictions made it difficult for the *jidaigeki* to succeed.³⁸ Despite the *jidaigeki* genre being deprived of themes associated with the “nationalism” of the past, the film industry in Japan still managed to produce around 160 films in the second year of the Occupation. No matter how strict the censorship, it could not prevent the demand for audiovisual entertainment. The Japanese people had not only suffered long years of war; the hardships of recovery had been no easier. The few movie theaters that were left unscathed after the war were “overflowing” with audiences who wanted to be entertained, not indoctrinated. The movie studios were quick to meet the interests of the audience and “every kind of light-hearted musical and comic drama” became smash hits.³⁹

2.5 The 1950s and 1960s – The power of Tōei *jidaigeki*

One of the most important reasons for the development of *jidaigeki* in the 1950s was the formation of a new film production company, Tōei. Tōei was founded in 1951 through various fusions with other studios, but despite this Tōei was on the verge of bankruptcy. From 1952 and onwards, however, the company's desperate situation was slowly improving, much because of the fact that the American Occupation had ended, and the popular *jidaigeki* genre was making its comeback. Tōei made several *gendaigeki* but was primarily known for its *jidaigeki* featuring famous movie stars of the time such as Kataoka Chiezō (1903-1983) and Ichikawa Utaemon (1907-1999). Many film studios, like Daiei, had released its scriptwriters, actors and directors because of the big difficulties involved in making a

³⁸ Desser, “Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film,” 145.

³⁹ McDonald, *Reading a Japanese film: Cinema in context*, 6-7.

jidaigeki in the early days of the Occupation, but Tōei signed new contracts and thus acquired new superstars, in addition to the stars they already had. Ninety *jidaigeki* films were made in 1952 by the Japanese film industry and among the major companies, Tōei was the one that produced the greatest amount of *jidaigeki*; it made twenty-six films, or twenty-eight percent of the total output. It was also the only Japanese film production company to make more *jidaigeki* than *gendai geki*. Tōei also made valuable contributions to popular cinema with its adaptations of radio *jidaigeki* for film; they successfully opened up the genre to a new generation when they released *jidaigeki* aimed at children and teenagers. The year 1957 marked a breakthrough for Tōei when it, as the first film studio in Japan, adopted CinemaScope,⁴⁰ and it made it to number one at the box office among the major studios. The peak of Tōei's success and the popularity of its *jidaigeki* films was maintained from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s, just prior to the so-called Japanese postwar economic miracle, and in 1961, Tōei was responsible for the production of more than thirty-two percent of all the films made in Japan.⁴¹

2.5.1 Breaking the Tōei formula

No matter how dominant Tōei was in the 1950s, there were many directors who tried to break the conventional formula dominating the period film genre. Inagaki was one such director, who created his highly acclaimed *Samurai Trilogy*. Inagaki's trilogy depicted the story of the historical master swordsman Miyamoto Musashi, utilizing swift and realistic choreography. Kurosawa was another innovator and very influential filmmaker of the *jidaigeki* genre. His 1954 film, *Seven Samurai* (*Shichinin no samurai*) has been described as one of the greatest and most influential films ever made⁴² and it is one of a select few Japanese films to become widely known in the West for an extended period of time.⁴³ The release of Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (*Rashōmon*) in 1950 sparked a renewed interest in the period film genre in Japan, at least an interest for those *jidaigeki* that also would be popular in the West.⁴⁴ In 1951, Kurosawa was awarded the first prize at the Venice Film Festival for *Rashomon*, which marks a significant year for the opening of Japanese film culture to the West as Kurosawa

⁴⁰ CinemaScope was used for shooting wide screen movies from 1953 to 1967. Its creation marked the beginning of the modern anamorphic format in principal photography and movie projection.

⁴¹ Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa: Film studies and Japanese cinema*, 227-229.

⁴² Chris Fujiwara, "Canon fodder: What it means to call *Seven Samurai* a great film", in *The Boston Phoenix*, August 29th, 2002, URL.

⁴³ Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa: Film studies and Japanese cinema*, 230, 235; McDonald, *Reading a Japanese film: Cinema in context*, 8.

⁴⁴ Dessler, "Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film", 145.

introduced Western audiences to Japanese film and Japanese culture.⁴⁵ Following the interest in Japanese cinema in the West, Kurosawa and other notable Japanese directors won several awards at Cannes and Venice in the first half of the 1950s.⁴⁶

In the early 1950s Japanese cinema saw a remarkable growth with economic, political and cultural factors working together. New movie theaters were built and the number soon matched the prewar figure of 2641. By 1959, that number had nearly tripled to 7401. When Japan achieved national independence with the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty (effective from 1952), the cinematic development in Japan began to flourish again to such a degree that this decade has been termed a “Golden Age” of postwar Japanese cinema. For *jidaigeki* this meant that particularly its subgenre *chanbara*, rose to popularity as the Japanese audience finally could enjoy once more the popular genre banned during the American Occupation. A wide variety of *chanbara* films were released in the course of the decade, with Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai* and Inagaki’s *Samurai Trilogy* among the most prominent examples.⁴⁷

As Yoshimoto has pointed out, with *Seven Samurai* Kurosawa created a different kind of *chanbara* film. In chapter three, I will account for some of the innovations from this film. Since Kurosawa worked for Tōhō film studio, a company which had not made many *chanbara* films before, he did not feel constrained by the existing genre formulas that other film production companies followed. Therefore, he was able to inject into the film a level of realism and detail that set *Seven Samurai* apart from the other, more conventional *jidaigeki* and *chanbara* at the time. Character motivations were carefully thought out at the scripting stage, and every detail of the production design was researched to convey the sense of realism that was so clearly lacking in many of the *chanbara* from the 1950s. The battle scenes too were realistic, with characters really fighting for their lives rather than engaging in theatrical, dance-like moves. Kurosawa’s *jidaigeki* films did not rely on distinctively historical facts (except *Kagemusha*) nor did they use classical *jidaigeki* material such as the *Chūshingura*, or classical characters such as Tange Sazen, Kunisada Chūji or Miyamoto Musashi to please the audience, who seemed to have an insatiable appetite for predictable storylines and recognizable characters and iconography. When Kurosawa did use popular

⁴⁵ Desser, “Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film”, 145; Stanley Kauffmann, “Rashomon”, in *Perspectives on Akira Kurosawa*, edited by James Goodwin (New York, Toronto, Ontario, Oxford, Singapore and Sydney: G.K. Hall and Co. Macmillan Publishing Company, 1994), 94-95.

⁴⁶ McDonald, *Reading a Japanese film: Cinema in context*, 8.

⁴⁷ McDonald, *Reading a Japanese film: Cinema in context*, 7-8.

elements from *jidaigeki*, he arranged them in a different, more unpredictable setting to highlight their generic conventions.⁴⁸ An example is Kurosawa's last wartime film, *The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail* (*Tora no o wo fumu otokotachi*, 1945), a *jidai-geki* with a simple narrative and small production scale.⁴⁹ The film is based on the *kabuki* play *Kanjinchō*, which is in turn a reworking of the *Nō* play⁵⁰ *Ataka*. The film's cast includes the Japanese comedian Enomoto Kenichi (1904-1970), mostly known by his stage name Enoken, and his character in the film is not included in the serious *Nō* play or the popularized *kabuki* version. "His improvisatory, farcial manner is utilized for contrast to the aristocratic formality of the original theater characters."⁵¹

2.5.2 Basic characteristics of Tōei *jidaigeki* films

Earlier, I explained how the Occupation years were harsh on the *jidaigeki*, with suppression and censorship leaving their marks on the genre. The Tōei studio dominated *jidaigeki* production in the 1950s often with very conventional film productions and following simple rules. Still, this studio had a tremendous influence on the genre and it set important standards for the *jidaigeki* genre, which is why it is significant to present some of the basic characteristics of Tōei period films from the 1950s. The defining scene in a Tōei *jidaigeki* was a sword fight, which is the reason why *jidaigeki* films from this studio are called *chanbara*. Still, the sword fighting was not as athletic and realistic as it was in *chanbara* films from before World War II; it was more stylized and included very slow, dance-like choreography. Therefore, one could say that Tōei period film to some degree was a primitive reenactment of *kyūgeki*, or in other words, that it was "a more technologically advanced version of the primitive cinema exemplified by the films of *kyūgeki* superstar Onoe Matsunosuke."⁵²

As Yoshimoto has pointed out, many of the Tōei films made in the 1950s were highly formulaic and, relying upon simplistic battles between good and evil, they lead to a happy

⁴⁸ Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa: Film studies and Japanese cinema*, 234-235.

⁴⁹ Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa: Film studies and Japanese cinema*, 93.

⁵⁰ *Nō* is a form of classical Japanese musical drama that has been performed since the 14th century. Many characters are masked, with men playing male and female roles. It would later influence other dramatic forms such as *kabuki*.

⁵¹ James Goodwin, *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 46.

⁵² Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa: Film studies and Japanese cinema*, 230.

ending, also known as victory for the hero and punishment and/or death for the villain.⁵³ In a Tōei *chanbara*, the righteous hero was always able to judge between right and wrong and never hesitated in his decision and resolve. The villain on the other hand, was a skeptic who questioned and tested the boundaries between good and evil, or right and wrong. As Yoshimoto has observed, “in the world of Toei *chanbara* films, anybody who ‘thinks’ falls into the category of a villain.”⁵⁴ The casting for the Tōei period films revealed the studio’s “anti-intellectual” attitude where the role of the hero was always played by a former *kabuki* actor or at least someone who knew the *kabuki* style, and the role of the villain was typically performed by someone from the *shingeki* theater.⁵⁵ The hero typically lacked character depth and substance, and the villain was punished precisely because of his clever mind as much as for his crimes.⁵⁶ Yoshimoto emphasizes that author Hashimoto Osamu (1948-) stresses the reason why Japanese audiences could identify themselves with the virtuous, crime-fighting heroes of Tōei’s *chanbara* films without much difficulty; it was due to a combination of social and political occurrences that put their damaging marks on postwar Japan.⁵⁷

2.6 The 1960s and 1970s – The coming of television, audience decline and innovation

When television officially commenced in Japan in 1953 there were only 866 TV sets in the country. By 1959, however, there were almost two million.⁵⁸ Still, at the same time the Japanese film industry was at its financial highpoint, and in 1958 over one billion movie theater tickets were sold. In 1960, another record was set for the most movie productions. 535 Japanese movies were released in around 900 theaters in Japan. Comparatively, in 2000 the figures read 282 released movies in around 300 theaters,⁵⁹ and in 2012, the number of Japanese productions had increased to 554. A decade later, in 1963, television had reached 65 percent of the country’s viewing audience with the film audience on a steady decline. 1964

⁵³ Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa: Film studies and Japanese cinema*, 229.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ *Shingeki* was the Japanese retelling of Western Realist Theater during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Retellings included the works of Western writers such as Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov.

⁵⁶ Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa: Film studies and Japanese cinema*, 229.

⁵⁷ Hashimoto mentions among others the Matsukawa and Shimoyama incidents (unsolved murders associated with railway accidents), Zosen *gigoku* (a shipbuilding scandal) and other political corruptions, the Cold War and the Korean War, and nuclear and hydrogen bomb experiments. Hashimoto Osamu quoted in Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa: Film studies and Japanese cinema*, 416.

⁵⁸ Anderson and Richie, *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry*, 254.

⁵⁹ There were of course many more theaters than that in Japan in 2000 (nearly 3000), but as Richie has observed, most of them only showed foreign films. Richie, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film*, 177.

was the year of the Tokyo Olympics. Prior to this huge event, a variety of modernizations and clean-ups had been implemented, and “everyone acquired a television set in order to view the Games.”⁶⁰ With a TV set in almost every Japanese family by 1964, the audience abandoned the movie theaters. The film industry had to economize and reform its products and marketing strategy in accordance with audience preferences, with the result that Tōei, known for its *jidaigeki* films, went on to make more up-to-date modern *yakuza* films, genre films dealing with gangsters and gamblers, in the hope that these films would eventually replace the *jidaigeki*. Still, there were *jidaigeki* being made in the 1960s. Kobayashi Masaki (1916-1999) made *jidaigeki* with antifeudal sentiments, challenging and resisting the deep-rooted power of authorities (*Harakiri* [*Seppuku*], 1962, and *Rebellion* [*Jōiuchi*], 1967).⁶¹

The innovations in the Japanese period film in the 1960s include the representation of violence and the *mise-en-scène*, while the genre’s more apparent defining characteristic was a realistic display of blood and the use of black-and-white filming. When it comes to the narrative, the general tendency was for the protagonists to “fight an isolated battle against a corrupt and ultimately overpowering bureaucratic society” and they were “doomed to failure by the sheer magnitude of the corruption of society,”⁶² which is a development I will come back to later when explaining post-war *jidaigeki* with the term “frontier of hopelessness.”⁶³ After about ten years spent producing lighter, more enjoyable *jidaigeki* in colors, Japanese film studios took a new direction, introducing some more mature, serious period films. The “cruel *jidaigeki*” sub-genre was born. Shot in black-and-white, with a realistic touch, the goal of these films was to dig into the dark stories of the feudal era, playing with genre codes, to criticize the brutality of both men and society. Filmmakers like Kudō Eiichi (director of the original *The Thirteen Assassins* from 1963, a film I will return to in chapter four) fought with their studios to produce these more realistic and downbeat movies as an alternative to popular feel-good *chanbara* adventures.⁶⁴

2.7 The 1980s, 1990s and current cinema

⁶⁰ Richie, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film*, 177.

⁶¹ McDonald, *Reading a Japanese film: Cinema in context*, 9-10; Richie, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film*, 164.

⁶² Isolde Standish, *A New History of Japanese Cinema: A Century of Narrative Film* (New York and London: Continuum, 2005), 286.

⁶³ Desser, “Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film,” 147.

⁶⁴ Standish, *A New History of Japanese Cinema: A Century of Narrative Film*, 286-287.

The year 1980 marked the beginning of the decade known as the miraculous “bubble economy” in Japan, which burst in 1991. For the Japanese film industry, this decade had some interesting effects in store. The disintegration of the major Japanese film studios and their associated chains of cinemas forced them to cut back on production and shift their focus to the more profitable trade of distribution. As the studios struggled, independent production and distribution came to fill the void.⁶⁵ Big companies founded by department stores, television companies, and publishing concerns also began producing films, and these firms gave the studios stiff competition. The most renowned big-budget directors moved toward internationally financed productions, and as an example, Kurosawa’s two *jidaigeki* films *Kagemusha* (1980) and *Ran* (1985) were both backed by American and French funding and thus saved from cancellation as Tōhō studios, the original producers, could not afford to complete them. Filmmakers George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola, both admirers of Kurosawa’s films, granted him the funds needed to finish *Kagemusha*, depicting the story of Takeda Shingen (a famous *daimyō*) and his body double.⁶⁶

2.7.1 The multiplex

Because of economic recessions, the number of movie theaters in Japan had been steadily decreasing since the 1960s. The 1990s saw the reversal of this trend and the introduction of the multiplex in Japan. Multiplexes are mainly owned by US studios or have close ties to US studios’ distributors and through their control of distribution networks around the world, the US majors can make sure that their films reach exhibitors and audiences everywhere. Because of the distribution technologies that enable Hollywood films to be screened in Japan (as well as in other parts of the world) there is also the potential to circulate films from elsewhere. Multiplex developments have actually lured audiences back to the movie theaters as well as creating record-breaking box-office income and also allowing non-Hollywood films to be screened.⁶⁷ The multiplex was presented as an extraordinary spatial “experience”, like a theme park, where the foreign exhibitors (like Warner-Mycal and Virgin) showed the power of amenities (flexible pricing, comfortable lobbies and seats, digital sound and parking). The multiplex was marketed as an improved experience compared to the older city

⁶⁵ McDonald, *Reading a Japanese film: Cinema in context*, 11-13.

⁶⁶ Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An introduction*, 3rd edition (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 632.

⁶⁷ Shohini Chaudhuri, *Contemporary World Cinema: Europe, The Middle East, East Asia and South Asia* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 4.

cinemas in Japan. Once the foreign exhibitors had established the effectiveness of these practices, the major studios in Japan moved in and followed their example.⁶⁸

2.7.2 Increased attendance, decreased domestic market share

Per 2005, the three largest film production studios in Japan (Tōhō, Tōei and Shochiku) dominated the Japanese film industry but of the three, only Tōhō had a decent economy. Movie theater attendance in Japan had increased in the first half of the 2000s, while the Japanese films' share of the domestic market was decreasing. In 1999, the Japanese films' market share had sunk to 32%. The number of film productions increased during the 1990s, from only 230 films in 1991 to 289 films in 1995 and in 2005 the number was somewhere between 270 and 280 films. However, a large share was soft-core pornography film, and ignoring those, only 169 feature films were produced in 1999. Despite the fact that Miyazaki Hayao's *anime* film *Spirited Away* (*Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi*, 2001) was a phenomenal success and beat James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997) as the most watched film in Japan ever, the Japanese, like most people in the West, watch more American movies than Japanese.⁶⁹

2.7.3 Positive developments

There were also other positive developments on a more formal and film political level. In February 2000, the Japan Film Commission Promotion Council was established.⁷⁰ In November 2001, the Japanese Foundation presented laws for the promotion of the arts to the House of Representatives. These laws promoted the production of media arts, including film scenery, and stipulated that the government, on both national and local levels, must lend aid in order to preserve film media. The laws were passed and came into effect in December the same year. The number of Japanese movies being shown in Japan steadily increased in the 2000s. Among the 821 films released in 2006, 417 were Japanese productions, which claimed over half of box-office returns, something that had not happened since the mid-1970s. 404 films were imported, and thus the share of Japanese films was 53,2% against the share of imported films at 46,8%. Although the number of admissions had dropped by 9426, from 164 585 admissions in 2006 to 155 159 admissions in 2012, the average admission fee had more or less remained stable. In 2012, the total number of movies released in Japan had increased

⁶⁸ Darrell William Davis, "Japan: Cause for (Cautious) Optimism", in *Contemporary Asian Cinema: Popular Cinema in a Global Frame*, edited by Anne Tereska Cieccko (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), 194.

⁶⁹ Gunnar Iversen, "Globale fabler og nasjonale fortellinger: Om den japanske filmen", in Terje Grønning (ed.), *Vinduer mot Japan* (Trondheim: Tapir Akademisk Forlag, 2005), 147-148.

⁷⁰ The Japanese Film Commission Promotion Council. "How FCs came to be established in Japan". URL.

to 983, with 554 Japanese productions and 429 imported films, making the share of Japanese films increase to 65,7% against the share of imported films which had decreased to 34,3% since 2006.⁷¹ The fortune of Japanese film seems to be turning, and this is in fact a rather different situation from many other countries where the tendency is a dominance of Hollywood films.⁷²

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s few *jidaigeki* films were made, especially when compared with the enormous amount released in the 1960s. Recently, however, the *jidaigeki* has been benefiting from what could perhaps be termed a genre renaissance, or revitalization. Popular Japanese directors feel confident enough to return to the genre and create films that are finding acclaim both in the Japanese domestic market and overseas. In the later analysis, I will discuss and analyze nine of them.

⁷¹ Motion Picture Producers Association of Japan, Inc. (Eiren), URL.

⁷² Jeremy Epstein, "World domination by box office cinema admissions", July 18th 2011, URL; For more details about the domination of Hollywood films in Japan and its domestic market share in the early 2000s, see also Sang-Woo Lee, "An Economic Analysis of the Movie Industry in Japan," in *Journal of Media Economics*, 2002, 15:2, 125-139.

3 *Jidaigeki* developments in the prewar and postwar eras

Because my research question is how the *jidaigeki* has evolved through the decades, I will in this chapter introduce some of the main narrative patterns of the period film in the prewar era, some of the early symbols and images associated with the genre and also its genre-specific development after World War II and onwards. The *chanbara* subgenre will be discussed and exemplified with a scene from Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*, and in the final section of this chapter, I will introduce a few stylistic trends in earlier Japanese period film, particularly *chanbara* films, before analyzing recent *jidaigeki* in chapter four. My focus on early narrative patterns, Tokugawa period iconography and genre-specific developments is relevant for the analysis in chapter four since it shows a continuity pattern within the evolution of the Japanese period film. The narrative focus is also relevant because it demonstrates the importance of narrative structure, genre codes and stylistic conventions in *jidaigeki*. Being a genre of (historical-mythical) fiction,⁷³ *jidaigeki* comments on the real world like fiction films generally do, in a characteristically indirect and ambiguous way. Therefore, the narrative mode of presentation is crucial in fiction films that are based on historical events, people, and periods.⁷⁴ In a Japanese period film this is demonstrated through the film's narrative structure, iconographic details (the samurai sword, costumes, hairstyles, speech, and social position and caste, to name a few) and a few genre specifics such as the samurai hero, the "frontier of hopelessness" and the binary opposition of *giri* (social obligation) and *ninjō* (human feelings, emotions). All these subtle hints and comments provide the audience with certain genre expectations that help to distinguish the Japanese period film.

3.1 *Jidaigeki* in the prewar era – the main narrative patterns

The early period film introduced narrative and thematic patterns mainly based on material from *kabuki* and *kōdan* that would dominate the genre until the end of World War II. Their great influence would continue to shape the cinematic style and expression of *jidaigeki* even

⁷³ Desser, "Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film," 150, 162-163.

⁷⁴ Jakob Lothe, *Fiksjon og film: Narrativ teori og analyse* 2nd edition (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2003), 20.

after the war. Despite the fact that the narrative patterns and hero types varied in early period films and in the popular tradition that grew out of them, they were constructed around the same feudalistic values and so they also shared a basic ideology. Even though the Meiji Restoration in 1868 marked the end of feudal Japan, it did not result in a denunciation of virtues central to the feudal value system; qualities such as honor, loyalty, respect, obedience, morality and the like. These virtues were still treasured, but they were also increasingly manipulated to imprint nationalism and eventually to breed militarism. Yet, they were manifested through legendary samurai as well as working-class heroes and constituted what Lisa Spalding has labeled “the ideological backbone of the early period film.”⁷⁵ In the following, I will therefore propose that the recent period films I have selected for analysis may be seen as developments of, or at least that they contain recognizable elements from, the following main narrative patterns as presented by Spalding. Two of these patterns are not relevant for this thesis since I have considered their connection to the nine contemporary films discussed in the analysis chapter to be too weak. The first is the use of primitive trick photography, considered to be an early example of special effects, and the second is the so-called *torimono* narrative, or criminal narratives set in the Tokugawa era.⁷⁶

3.1.1 The vendetta narrative

Throughout the early stages of the development of the period film, one can distinguish some important narrative patterns that were established. Among these, the theme of the vendetta is perhaps the most obvious. Since honor was paramount in the value system of the samurai, the slightest sign of insult or disrespect to his family or clan had to be avenged. Two such classic vendetta stories, the first is about the Soga brothers, the second is the *Chūshingura*, or the story about the forty-seven *rōnin*, were filmed several times starting as early as 1908. Happening centuries apart, these legends introduce us to essential standards for narrative and the representation of the hero figure, standards that have lasted since the early feudal period and up to our present time. *The tale of the Soga brothers* tells the story of two brothers who seek their father’s murderer in order to kill him and avenge their father, who had become an innocent victim of a dispute between two rivaling clan lords when the brothers were still young boys. After waiting for eighteen years, the brothers manage to kill the man responsible and thus they fulfill the feudalistic ideal of honor. One of the brothers died in the battle ensuing their attack, and the other was beheaded on the *shōgun*’s order. The most famous of

⁷⁵ Spalding, “Period Films in the Prewar Era,” 133.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 134-135.

these legends, *Chūshingura*, tells the tale of the forty-seven loyal *rōnin*, who used to serve under Asano Naganori, the *daimyō* of the Akō domain, and sought to revenge his death. In 1703 the *shōgun* had ordered Asano to commit ritual suicide (*seppuku*) after Asano had drawn his sword and attacked another nobleman in the palace, and to draw one's sword in the presence of the *shōgun* was strictly forbidden. The shogunate confiscated Asano's lands (the Akō domain) and dismissed the samurai who had served him, making them masterless *rōnin*. Nearly two years later, a group of Akō *rōnin* captured and executed the man who had provoked their lord to dishonor himself, before they turned themselves in to the authorities. The benevolent *shōgun* allowed them, as honorable and loyal samurai, to commit *seppuku* instead of having them beheaded for their illegal act.⁷⁷

Although none of the heroes from the two legends were directly involved in the incidents leading up to their quests for revenge, they were all righteous samurai who assumed responsibility out of a sense of loyalty or filial piety (*giri*), and they placed honor above personal issues (*ninjō*) and endured until they had fulfilled their mission. In the vendetta narrative the hero's death decides the conflict between the requirements of the samurai code of honor and the *shōgun*'s commitment to uphold law and order and political stability. The protagonist's death as such was not a required factor in the vendetta narrative, but the endings in these two stories of the Soga brothers and the loyal forty-seven *rōnin* may be seen as early tendencies for narratives leading to the death of the hero.⁷⁸ The binary opposition of *giri* and *ninjō* will be further explained later in this chapter.

3.1.2 The *ōie-sōdō* narrative

A third popular pattern was *ōie-sōdō* narratives (literally “disorder in a great house”), which connected legendary accounts of internal struggles within clans where the disputes centered around the accession of an heir or rivalry between retainers for the favor of their lord. This type of narrative presented the samurai with plenty of chances to carry out duties of filial piety and loyalty.⁷⁹

3.1.3 The *kanzen chōaku* narrative

⁷⁷ Spalding, “Period Films in the Prewar Era,” 134.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 135.

Associated with the already-mentioned ideals of lawfulness and the supremacy of authoritative figures, there is a fourth narrative pattern which showed wise and generous dignitaries implementing the ethical feudal principle of *kanzen chōaku*, or rewarding the virtuous and punishing the wicked. The heroes in these narratives protected the weak and poor from various forces of evil, such as an immoral lord, a greedy moneylender or a corrupt local official. From 1969 to 2011, *Mito Kōmon* was a popular *jidaigeki* television show in Japan. The title character is a heavily mythologized take on the life of Tokugawa Mitsukuni of the Mito domain, an elderly lord and member of the dominant Tokugawa family. A model of what Lisa Spalding calls “the venerable patriarch”, Mito Kōmon (in the disguise of a simple traveler) and his helpers visited every corner of Japan, rescued the weak and poor, and exposed the evil perpetrator before Mito revealed his own identity to everyone’s surprise.⁸⁰

3.1.4 The legendary swordfighter narrative

A sixth narrative pattern concerns itself with the feats of legendary swordfighters, where the stories focused on grand, exaggerated battles with an unbeatable hero who stood up against hordes of sword-wielding opponents. The legendary historical hero Miyamoto Musashi illustrates this type of warrior, devoting his life to the sword and journeying all over Japan to perfect his skills. Despite challenging and being challenged by various swordsmen on his travels, somehow he always manages to win.⁸¹

3.1.5 The working-class hero narrative

The seventh and last among the major narrative patterns used in early period films gave prominence to popular working-class heroes originating in outlawed rebel milieus such as honorable thieves and *yakuza*. These outlaws openly fought to defend the weak and poor and went against the authorities, but their actions were considered to be disobedient and rebellious, so they were always punished. The degree to which respect for the authorities pervaded the early period film is clearly evident here; the righteous outlaw folk hero was expected to be captured. When it came to the *yakuza*, they were generally portrayed as outlaws in *jidai-geki* who had connections to the underground world of gambling and organized into groups under gangster bosses, or *oyabun*, whose leadership, influence and control was absolute. The *yakuza* also had their own code of honor that not only indicated

⁸⁰ Spalding, “Period Films in the Prewar Era,” 135.

⁸¹ Ibid., 134-135.

their protection of the weak and opposition of the strong, but also that if needed, they would sacrifice their lives for a good cause. Among popular depictions of noble *yakuza*, the historical legendary figure Kunisada Chūji was an influential *oyabun* and had many loyal men under him as well as sporting a good reputation among victims of injustice, meaning he was also feared among his many vicious adversaries. Both types, the *yakuza* hero and the conscientious thief, were respected and admired as (relatively) honest, good men, but since they always were caught the period films did not question the authority figures of their time.⁸²

3.2 *Jidaigeki* iconography⁸³

What distinguishes a *jidaigeki* from a *gendai geki*, is the men's iconography, for example the two swords and the topknot. Most of the nine films I have selected for analysis, take place in the Tokugawa period of Japanese history, and on a general basis, as much as ninety percent of Japanese period films are set in the Tokugawa period. To understand a period film it is essential to identify and to interpret its iconography, or the signs that the characters carry in the films: costumes, hairstyles, speech pattern, movement, and their value within a particular group. These signs (and others) express something about the characters and thus iconography helps us to understand the context of the narrative. What we can learn from the information that a character communicates is his place in society, and the context of the narrative is that society, namely the society of the Tokugawa period (ca. 1600-1867), when the Tokugawa clan ruled the country. Therefore, it may be appropriate to give some examples of the meaning of the Tokugawa iconography and what function it has in the period film. However, iconography is not only a way to understand the past we are introduced to in *jidaigeki*, it also represents contemporary society. Thornton suggests that it is often the case in Japanese period films that these signs are up-to-date so that the audience realizes that the film's narrative is not merely recounting historical events or legends from the past, it is also a critical depiction of present-day society. For example, in the Tokugawa period, married women would paint their teeth black and shave their eyebrows, which is usually not the case in period films. The reason is because *jidaigeki* women will more closely resemble contemporary women without it.⁸⁴

⁸² Spalding, "Period Films in the Prewar Era," 136.

⁸³ Iconography may be defined as the traditional or conventional images or symbols associated with a subject and especially a religious or legendary subject.

⁸⁴ Thornton, *The Japanese Period Film: A Critical Analysis*, 15-16.

3.2.1 Prewar

The use of simple props and costumes characterized the early *jidaigeki*. As the genre evolved however, it was only natural that much of its complex iconography was determined in this early, formative period. The iconography came to define narrative patterns, hero types and cinematic style, and the broad extent and function of iconography within the period film genre is a demanding task, and not possible to indicate within the limits of my thesis. Recognition of its influence and a summarizing list of common images will nevertheless be briefly outlined here. The most defining and mythical image in period film of the early 1900s was the sword, as it was used both to accelerate and determine narrative conflicts. The *daitō* is a long sword (such as *katana*), and the samurai used them as a deadly weapon. Perhaps even more than a weapon, the sword was a symbol of the very soul of the samurai and if the *daitō* was lost, it was almost considered “spiritual castration.”⁸⁵ To identify the character’s rank within the feudal hierarchy, details such as hairstyle and clothing were crucial. In this way, the noble samurai would be separated from the rougher-looking *rōnin* or the regular townsmen. The last trademark of prewar era *jidaigeki* I will mention is the journey motif, which demanded its own distinctive iconography with straw sandals (*waraji*) as the most common image. In addition to the *waraji*, traveling *yakuza* could further be identified by their straw hats and capes, while men of higher ranks rode in *norimono*, or palanquins, escorted by a procession of their entourage. Eventually, the visual aspects of the period film became more dominated by bigger budgets and changing notions of style, but the basic iconography has remained stable. The evolution of the genre, including some of the visual aspects of contemporary *jidaigeki*, will to some extent be analyzed and compared in the main analysis.⁸⁶

3.2.2 Postwar and onwards

Absolute and relative status

In traditional Japanese society, there are two kinds of status: absolute and relative. Absolute status is based on caste and defines the social identity and function that is obtained by birth. The traditional way of differentiating between castes is to separate the warriors (*bushi*) from everyone below them. Only the warrior was allowed to carry two swords, to have a proper name, and to wear his top-knot high and flipped forward straight over the crown of the head.

⁸⁵ Spalding, “Period Films in the Prewar Era,” 136.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 136-137.

The term “warrior” (*bushi*) refers to the different ranks associated with the warrior caste: rich and poor warriors, in service (*samurai*) or not (*rōnin*). When it comes to distinguishing the status of women, their robes indicate status. The robes worn by the wives and daughters of military men tend to have flower patterns of a rather moderate style and the women wear white underwear. The robes of the wives and daughters of commoners tend to have black collars, geometric patterns such as stripes and checks with red underwear peeking out at the collar.⁸⁷

The relative status is based on one’s position within a particular group, so that a person, no matter if he is a warrior or townsman, is assessed by how well he fits into a prejudiced model, an ideal. This ideal is challenging in that it changes depending on whom the person is together with, whether it is a superior, an equal or an inferior. The guest will therefore be responsible for a person’s change of language, of physical movement, and of space. An example of arrangement in space is the Japanese table etiquette employed when people are seated at a table. The most important person of the party will sit at one end of the room, on the honored seat, which is located farthest from the entrance. If there is a decorative alcove (*tokonoma*) in the room, this person should be seated in front of it. People of decreasing importance are seated farther and farther away. The warriors have their own kind of etiquette, or iconography, to follow, such as the way they do their hair, the way they dress and the way they sit with their knees apart. In fact, there is practically no part of the character’s iconography that does not communicate a sense of caste and relative place in a hierarchy. Iconography is thus the method of communicating the narrative context, or “all those things one has to take for granted before one can accept the premises of the plot, the logic of the sequence of events.”⁸⁸ Social iconography is what constitutes the iconography of the Japanese period film, which means that it is Japanese society that is the subject, the theme of the films. Hierarchy is the main pursuit of this society, as status is of the individual.⁸⁹

Hair as status: Insiders versus outsiders

During the Tokugawa period in Japan, people of every class were subject to strict sumptuary laws that regulated the expression of ideas that were deemed a threat to public decorum, safety, or morality, or that were subversive to the ruling Tokugawa shogunate, such as the

⁸⁷ Thornton, *The Japanese Period Film: A Critical Analysis*, 16.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

types of clothing that could be worn and the items one could own. The principal function of Tokugawa sumptuary laws and, therefore, of the iconography of the period, was to indicate who were insiders and who were outsiders. Three definitions can be said to draw the lines between insider and outsider.⁹⁰

First, the insiders of Tokugawa society, at least in theory, were roughly divided into four classes: the samurai on top and the farmers on the second level. Below the farmers were the artisans, and even below them, on the fourth level, were the merchants. Everyone above (court noble) or below (*eta* and *hinin*) was essentially an outsider.⁹¹ This can be seen in films by people's hairstyles. If a man is an insider, his hair is usually tied in a ponytail, stiffened with camellia oil and folded over the shaven crown in the characteristic topknot, known as *chonmage*. Buddhist monks, masseurs, and those who have taken formal Buddhist vows, have completely shaven heads, a sign that shows they have left society. Teachers, doctors, and Kyoto noblemen do not have shaved crowns, a sign that shows their irregular status. Young boys who have not yet had their coming-of-age ceremonies wear forelocks. Second, there was a line separating the warriors from the farmers, artisans and merchants. Again, this can be seen in films in people's hairstyles. The warrior group (lords, vassals, and unemployed), in addition to doctors, teachers and Kyoto noblemen, all wear their hair straight off the sides and back. Commoners wear their hair fanned out behind the ears, like a small bag. Third, the upper and lower ranks of the samurai were distinguished.⁹² In Japanese, the word "samurai" refers to both a member of the warrior class, and the entire class as a whole. Within the social status as samurai, there were different ranks that held different privileges. By the Heian period, a system was established with three primary ranks of samurai. The first was *kenin* (housemen), who were administrators or vassals, the second was foot soldiers, and the third was mounted samurai (the highest rank of samurai and thus allowed to fight on horseback).

The tension of the insider-outsider problem has been notably expressed in the period film with common images such as the low-ranking, unemployed *rōnin* furiously fighting their oppressors, abusers and betrayers. The period film has extended the social distinctions of the

⁹⁰ Thornton, *The Japanese Period Film: A Critical Analysis*, 17.

⁹¹ *Eta* and *hinin* are Japanese terms for the pariah castes. The *eta* had jobs that were considered impure or tainted by death, such as butcher, undertaker or tanner. The *hinin* supported themselves as beggars, criminals, street entertainers, prostitutes and so on.

⁹² Thornton, *The Japanese Period Film: A Critical Analysis*, 17-18.

Tokugawa period to express a psychological or political meaning, such as the overgrown crown; it used to mean that the man had not been to the barber, usually because of illness. In period films, however, hair on the crown that has grown out indicates the outsider. Examples here include, but are not limited to: degraded (but willing) *rōnin* fighting an abusive, terrorizing lord such as the group of *rōnin* assassins in *13 Assassins*, or the degraded, unkempt *rōnin* Twilight Seibei who has to fight to save his family, his love Tomoe and his self-respect in *The Twilight Samurai*, or the vicious *rōnin* Kazamatsuri whose only purpose in life is to test his skills with a sword in *Samurai Fiction*.

A man's world

According to Thornton, women's iconography in *jidaigeki* is problematic because Japanese period film, for the most part, is not really about women, and this is observed through the frequent reference to the present rather than the past in women's iconography. Men's hairstyles are important in *jidaigeki*; hair was a marker for caste and rank within the feudal system. Things changed in the Meiji period when men cut their hair to be more "modern". Women, on the other hand, did not cut their hair and their dress remained more or less the same. Although women's hairstyles and costumes indicate age, caste, rank, marital status, and profession, women's iconography in *jidaigeki* does not serve to distinguish between insiders and outsiders. A woman has no status; her status is flexible and yields to her male heads of household. Since *jidaigeki* is not concerned with women, the speech, costume, and dress of women in period films mirrors the stages and changes in life that women in general go through: girlhood, marriage, motherhood, old age, and widowhood.⁹³

3.3 *Jidaigeki* developments in the postwar period

The narrative-structural lines in the definition of the *jidaigeki* has been broadly outlined by Anderson and Richie:

The hero in all these films was usually a samurai, masterless or not, or sometimes a sort of "chivalrous commoner" who is allowed to carry a sword – or again, he might be a gambler. The plot usually turns upon his receiving an obligation, usually accidentally, which he must discharge by performing some dangerous or distasteful deed, often in conflict with other duties or obligations. Other plot movers are revenge and the protection of the innocent.⁹⁴

Although Anderson and Richie primarily defined the *jidaigeki* of the prewar period, their definition is still relevant for the postwar film. Because of what David Desser describes as

⁹³ Thornton, *The Japanese Period Film: A Critical Analysis*, 24-26.

⁹⁴ Anderson and Richie, *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry*, 64.

“the postwar concern with the question of duty and loyalty to a society which may be in the wrong,”⁹⁵ he adds to Anderson and Richie’s definition the recurrent postwar plot of conflict between two feudal clans, or within a clan, *ōie-sōdō*, which I have also mentioned in the prewar narratives. Genre movies are best understood through a series of narrative patterns and iconographic clues, whether it is the genre of western or that of the *jidaigeki*. Many of the central characteristics of the prewar *jidaigeki* are prevalent in the postwar period film too, such as the key image of the sword, the *daitō*, which immediately places one in the period film genre. It is of course an oversimplification to use the image of the sword as the only marker with which to distinguish the Japanese period film, since some *jidaigeki* contain little, or no killing; others use the sword to excess; some deal with feudal politics and society, while others are not concerned about the historical setting or accuracy. The main principles of how the *jidaigeki* developed from the postwar period and up to the present time can be illustrated with four subgenres. Before I go on to clarify the differences between them, however, a few broad remarks about the *jidaigeki* will help to connect the subgenres to an overarching whole.⁹⁶

3.3.1 The great paradox

As I have already mentioned, it is the Meiji Restoration of 1868 that marks the historical division for the periodical line between *jida-geki* and *gendai-geki*. The *jidaigeki* is set in the feudal era, which can be considered from the years 1188 up until 1868 and it therefore comprises the Kamakura, Muromachi and Momoyama eras, in addition to the period of Tokugawa/Edo. These years stretch across the rise of the samurai class and how it seized its power at the emperor’s court and to the final disbanding of the samurai after the Meiji Restoration. Similar to the western genre in this respect, the *jidaigeki* can usually be located within a smaller part of this extensive spectrum. If one counts the years 1750-1917 as the period of the American frontier and the western’s main concern, most westerns operate within the years 1830-1890, and typically 1865-1890. In the same way, the *jidaigeki* confines itself to the Tokugawa period (1600-1868), and this is, according to Desser, a part of “the great paradox” of the Japanese period film, namely “the focus of attention on warriors in a time of relative peace.”⁹⁷ Later, he claims that the “great paradox of the Samurai Film is that

⁹⁵ Desser, “Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film,” 146.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 145-146.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 146.

is has nothing whatsoever to do with history and everything to do with myth.”⁹⁸ This is an interesting observation, since it is not *jidaigeki* films brought together as “samurai films” that fail to consider history properly, but the notion of the samurai film itself. According to Yoshimoto, the samurai film as a generic category “tells us less about Japanese cinema and more about a colonialist representation of Japan, which is shared by many Westerners and Japanese.”⁹⁹

To elaborate further, since the most common setting for *jidaigeki* is the Tokugawa period, this made it possible for film directors to form sword-fighting scenes into scenes suitable for mass entertainment. This was something which contemporary settings at the time were not able to assist with because although the time after the Meiji period was modernized, the very process of modernization was still in the making and culture, tradition and people’s old ways of life are not thrown away so easily. Change takes time and when filmmakers observed contemporary Japan, they did not see a fully modernized society but tensions and ambiguities that happened because of the ongoing process of modernization. The tensions in Japanese society and with people’s lives increasingly adapting to, and being transformed by, the “modernizing forces of monopoly capitalism”, had their natural impact on audience demand: more speed and spectacle. Films showing Japanese contemporary life, *gendai geki*, could not always satisfy this demand since the modernization of the country was still in progress. Thus, a paradox emerges as the country’s modernization process continues: demand for films from the (not so distant) past, films set in feudal Japan. However, the Tokugawa period we see in *jidaigeki*, is not necessarily historical accurate depiction of the time, it is rather the idealized image of it.¹⁰⁰

3.3.2 The “frontier of hopelessness”

One of the principal foundations of the *jidaigeki* genre with regards to form and structure is the waning days of the samurai as a warrior class. When watching a *jidaigeki*, the audience is all the time forced to deal with and consider the withering of the samurai traditions and the inevitable collapse of his way of life. The samurai class is to be abolished immediately after the Meiji Restoration, which is something the audience knows, but the characters do not. The spirit and code of the samurai warrior, known as *bushidō* (“the way of the warrior”), survived

⁹⁸ Desser, “Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film,” 163.

⁹⁹ Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa: Film studies and Japanese cinema*, 213.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 216.

World War II, but after Japan's defeat and the following American Occupation, it too was revised and occasionally criticized. This is why one finds in the Japanese period film a "frontier of hopelessness", as Desser describes it. The hero struggles and endures but he is still "foredoomed to failure". In Ivan Morris's words, it is the idea of this failed hero, this "nobility of failure", that the Japanese audience values so much.¹⁰¹ In the formulaic narratives from Hollywood there is, in most cases, a requirement for the hero to be left alive at the end. In classic *jidaigeki* narratives it is almost the opposite. It usually ends badly for the protagonist. Although he continues to fight when he knows his cause is lost, or rather, especially when his cause is lost, the films require him to fight proudly until the bitter end. However, it is not just the concept of dying that the Japanese audience admires, but also the image of a hero who fights for a hopeless cause.¹⁰²

3.3.3 *Giri* versus *ninjō*: A binary opposition

Unlike the hero of a western movie, the samurai hero is born into a strictly formalized and codified concept of *bushidō*. The samurai was born into a certain caste, making him inherit a wide range of duties and responsibilities. The western gunfighter has a different starting point. The rough, strenuous climate and the times in which he lives are the factors that form and create him. The samurai, on the other hand, is not so much created as he is molded in his childhood and adolescence, so that it becomes increasingly harder for him to distinguish between what is training, or an adjustment to culture and assimilation into this culture, and what is his own humanity. The Japanese opposition of this is called *giri/ninjō*. Strictly speaking, *giri* means "duty" or "obligation" and *ninjo* means "humanity" (literally: human feeling). The words together, *giri ninjō*, usually refer to a conflict between what one wishes and what society demands. The classic example of *ninjō* is that of a samurai who falls in love with an unacceptable partner (perhaps somebody of low social class or somebody of an enemy clan). As a loyal member of his clan, he then becomes torn between the obligation to his feudal lord and to his personal feelings, with the only possible resolution being *shinjū*, double love-suicide. To modern Japanese people, this dichotomy is still valid, but in a period film it has a greater, more dramatic role because the film "functions to mythicize the dichotomy by placing it in a cinematic past and alleviating the conflict through ritualistic acts of heroic violence."¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Ivan Morris quoted in Desser, "Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film," 147.

¹⁰² Desser, "Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film," 146-147.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 147.

3.4 *Jidaigeki* subgenres

How did the evolution of the *jidaigeki* take form from the postwar period and up to the present time? According to David Desser, one can distinguish between four types of period films after World War II. These are the nostalgic samurai drama, the anti-feudal drama, Zen fighters, and *chanbara*, the sword film. Although listed here as four separate subgenres, they may of course overlap and naturally, different films will possess elements from more than one of them. However, these are the main segments that are clearly recognizable in postwar *jidaigeki* films.¹⁰⁴

3.4.1 The nostalgic samurai drama

The first type of the *jidaigeki* subgenres to become apparent in the postwar period is the nostalgic samurai drama. According to Desser, the most representative films of this subgenre belong to Inagaki Hiroshi whose films bring forth a feeling of what the Japanese call *mono no aware*, one of the fundamental parts of traditional Japanese aesthetics. The meaning of this phrase is complex, but it basically refers to a “pathos” (*aware*) of “things” (*mono*); it describes the awareness of impermanence, or the transience of all things and a feeling of gentle sadness, wistfulness, at their passing.¹⁰⁵

According to Desser, *mono no aware* permeates the nostalgic samurai drama through stylistic and thematic devices. This subgenre usually centers its focus on a *rōnin*, and the literal meaning of the term *rōnin* is “wave man”, which not only illustrates that he is a man who is socially adrift after fleeing his master’s land but can also imply and generate the feeling of *mono no aware*. A *rōnin* has lost his status in the rigid system of the feudal state and is on his own, powerless but proud, and the waves of fate carry him on. This idea is a strong metaphor to the Japanese of a more general “eternal state” of humankind. A *jidaigeki* normally takes place in the Tokugawa period, a time in which the *rōnin* had trouble finding employment as true samurai. Tokugawa was a time of relative peace, but under the rule of the powerful and repressive shogunate, a *daimyō* often was forced to cut the size of his army, thus making his

¹⁰⁴ Desser, “Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film,” 146.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 147-148.

loyal samurai retainers unemployed and masterless. The *rōnin* became wanderers and a kind of Good Samaritans, doing good deeds in return for food and gratitude.¹⁰⁶

The nostalgia of *mono no aware* in a period film is also sometimes maintained through the fact that the *rōnin* hero is trapped in the way of *giri/ninjō*, he feels compelled to take the righteous path and almost never questions or attacks the rigid, repressing system which is the direct cause for his current situation. There is one thing the hero can do if he wants to escape his feudal past; he can change his name, a sign with a material status of its own. The *rōnin*'s name reveals his birth, his status, his ties within the historical chain, and his comprehension of duty. Changing his name, however, does not help the *rōnin* hero to re-create himself, and he is never able to because he is still trapped in the conventions and norms of the feudal society (*giri*). As a result, the *rōnin* fate is to continue to be an unavoidably sad character.¹⁰⁷ At the end of *Samurai I: Musashi Miyamoto* by Inagaki, Takezo has changed his name to "Miyamoto Musashi." This is the samurai name granted to Takezo after he has spent three years in captivity reading books about philosophy and religion, before he is "reborn" and all traces of the wild Takezo have seemingly disappeared.

A more formalistic approach of creating a cinematic sense of *mono no aware* is exemplified by Desser, with the movie *Bandits on the Wind* (*Yato kaze no naka o hashiru*, 1961) by Inagaki. The film's likable, sympathetic *rōnin* heroes tragically die in the end, having won their cause. This is not, however, the only way of experiencing the nostalgia of *mono no aware* in the film. Inagaki's use of camera and art direction reflect emotional states, and "graceful camera movements imbue this film with a great deal of sensitivity."¹⁰⁸ Further, the film is shot in black and white, which becomes an aesthetic device on its own, reflecting in Desser's words, the Japanese ideal of *wabi* (prizing subdued, simple and austere beauty). Nature is a common artistic mode that can, alone, be enough to bring out *mono no aware*,¹⁰⁹ as Desser continues to elaborate:

Like a monochrome painting, the film tries to capture a landscape without coloring in its details, details which might detract from the purity of its vision and the feelings it hopes to arouse. The camera movements tend toward horizontal tracking, which deemphasizes the illusion of depth within the frame. The relatively long takes employed combine with these lateral tracks in shots which link the village with

¹⁰⁶ Desser, "Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film," 148.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 148-149.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 149.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 149-150.

the rural countryside which surrounds it, calling forth a clear association between nature and the villagers.¹¹⁰

The last evident characteristic in the nostalgic samurai drama is the opposition of *giri* and *ninjō*. The *jidaigeki* presents narratives with a clear distinction between right and wrong which is a reason why the protagonist will maneuver himself around in a world of unambiguous moral choices regardless of his success in the end. Ultimately however, the *giri/ninjō* dichotomy is unresolvable. Therefore, the protagonist serves the function of a necessary sacrifice to be made, and this is shown in violence and battles that usually leads to his death in a ritual of repeated formulaic narratives. The violence inherent in the nostalgic samurai drama has a second function, namely to serve as a reminder to the audience of *mono no aware* and the irony and impermanence of life.¹¹¹

Thus, the nostalgic samurai drama emerged out of a longing and nostalgia for the form of the *jidaigeki* film itself. Most of the films within this subgenre persistently followed the narrative and structural patterns of the films made before World War II, albeit with less emphasis on the unparalleled morality of the feudal system. At the same time, the nostalgic samurai drama may be seen as an attempt to rediscover and acknowledge the past and history of the Japanese people, something they had been denied by the restrictions of SCAP under the American Occupation years following World War II. Gradually, the sentiments toward Japan's past changed and the nostalgic samurai drama did no longer answer the questions of filmmakers who were willing to bring up more serious and critical matters within the already established cinematic genre of *jidaigeki*. A new subgenre grew out of the nostalgic samurai drama, namely the anti-feudal drama.¹¹²

3.4.2 The anti-feudal drama

This subgenre arose in the early 1960s, with filmmakers such as Kobayashi Masaki and Gosha Hideo at the helm and they both contributed to making the anti-feudal drama a significant form within the overarching *jidaigeki* genre. At the same time their films represent a clear step away from for example Inagaki's films, thematically, narratively and stylistically. Why this subgenre did not emerge earlier is not easy to explain, but Desser tries by showing

¹¹⁰ Desser, "Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film," 149.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 150.

¹¹² Ibid., 150-151.

that nostalgia for the very form of *jidaigeki* “must necessarily precede the use of the form to deal with the past or the present in politically meaningful ways”.¹¹³ At the same time, Desser suggests that after the militaristic regime which glorified the codes of *bushidō*, there were many film directors with fierce anti-feudal affinities who might have been reluctant to work within the form of the anti-feudal *jidaigeki*. There have been precedents to this anti-feudal drama in the prewar years, and particularly in one subgenre that I have mentioned earlier, namely the narrative pattern of the rebellious outlawed working-class hero (the rebel subgenre). To find the source of the return of this *jidaigeki* subgenre, Desser points to the political climate in Japan in 1959-60, when renewals of two cooperation agreements with the United States, the Mutual Security Pact and the Mutual Defense Pact were approved. The pacts remained in force despite the riots, protests and violence that ensued, injuring hundreds of demonstrators. The two agreements entailed a possible return to militaristic politics, and reminded Japanese people of their country’s militaristic past. To prominent film directors and other intellectuals, most of them belonging to the political left-wing, this development was a cause for concern.¹¹⁴

The anti-feudal samurai drama reemerged then in the early 1960s as a cinematic warning against the dangers of feudalism, of putting the system before the wellbeing of the people. It was perhaps a natural response to the current political climate as well as an effort to adjust the image of feudalism embedded within the nostalgic samurai drama subgenre. The plots of the anti-feudal drama and those of the nostalgic samurai drama are largely the same, and they present stories about a man of a certain position, usually a samurai, who becomes a wandering *rōnin*. Similar to the narratives of the nostalgic drama, the *rōnin* is ultimately convinced to try to do good deeds for people before he normally dies at the end of the film. Whereas the nostalgic samurai drama usually begins *after* the hero’s position has been lost, the hero of the anti-feudal drama generally starts out as a man with a certain status. He is an ordinary samurai who has been born into a higher rank he expects to keep. He has found his place in feudal society and does everything the society demands of him. When this society turns its back on the samurai hero, it is never his fault, but always caused by a repressive system which simply has no need for him anymore. The samurai hero then loses his position and there is no other alternative for him than to become *rōnin*. Since he has always pledged himself to the moral code of *bushidō* and honored *giri* above *ninjō*, becoming *rōnin* is an

¹¹³ Desser, “Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film,” 151.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 150-152.

undesirable and agonizing last option. The life of the *rōnin* is not easy, living in poverty and isolation from society. After a while, the hero's new position makes him doubt the justice and morality of the system that has thrown him out, and he goes on to find causes worth fighting for (such as working to destroy the system). Naturally, the hero's actions are inherently tragic since he seeks out conflicts with representatives of the oppressive system that he himself only recently was a part of.¹¹⁵

As a rule, the *rōnin* hero of the anti-feudal samurai drama is better skilled with a sword than his counterpart in the nostalgic samurai drama subgenre, as is demonstrated through one or more scenes of epic swordfighting. Once again we see the irony and appreciation of the nobility of failure as the hero usually dies in a climactic bloodshed after a noble, spectacular struggle but without reaching his final goal. When it comes to the characteristics of style and form, the anti-feudal drama employs Cinemascope framing (wide screen) along with deep-focus cinematography. Cinemascope favors the use of grand tableaux and highlights the space around the individual, making the hero smaller and thus reducing his importance. Combined with the deep-focus composition this effect is enhanced since the details in the frame become just as important as the protagonist, it contextualizes him. The settings, too, differ from the nostalgic samurai drama. The anti-feudal drama keeps the heroes firmly within a social setting such as courtyards and castle interiors, or travelers' inns as the most significant locales for action. This gives an impression of the oppressive society keeping the protagonist a "prisoner." This happens within fixed limitations such as the walls and roof of a building, to keep the hero within the strictly defined social laws of the system. The nostalgic drama on the other hand tends toward connecting the heroes with nature and settings with natural beauty to evoke the sense of nostalgia.¹¹⁶

One important similarity between the nostalgic and the anti-feudal dramas is that they place too much value on society and too little on the individual. Again, there is the presence of the *giri/ninjō* opposition. Similarly to the nostalgic samurai drama, the tragic death of the hero in the anti-feudal drama becomes a mere tool to generate the above-mentioned feeling of *mono no aware*. The *giri/ninjō* conflict and criticism of society are still central elements of the films, but as potential anxiety and conflicts arise, they become stifled by the sadness and

¹¹⁵ Desser, "Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film," 152-153.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 153.

nostalgia of *mono no aware* and “cathartic violence,”¹¹⁷ as Desser describes it. For while these anti-feudal films certainly condemn the feudal system, inevitably they also allow the tragic *rōnin* character to dominate the emotional content and the feeling of *mono no aware* becomes “an aesthetic response to a social issue.”¹¹⁸ Neither the nostalgic samurai drama nor the anti-feudal drama was able to keep up popularity for long because of a third subgenre that emerged to take their place: The Zen fighters.¹¹⁹

3.4.3 Zen fighters

Developing alongside the nostalgic samurai drama was a third subgenre of postwar *jidaigeki*, films about so-called Zen fighters, and this subgenre managed to outlast and live beyond the nostalgic samurai drama. The Zen fighters subgenre deals with both ancient legends and modern creations of warriors who “explicitly invoke and evoke”¹²⁰ Zen. The influence of Zen Buddhism on Japanese culture in general and on the military classes in particular is well known, but, according to Desser, the extent to which Zen precepts have become “mythicized” into the *jidai-geki* genre has been largely ignored, with the exception of Gregory Barrett who connects the Zen myth with the legendary warrior Miyamoto Musashi in his book.¹²¹

In this respect, I want to add that as a general, shared “rule” among Western authors’ studies of Japanese film, it has been common to narrow down the focus to philosophical, aesthetic values of the traditional “high culture”. Barrett lists the names of a few:

In an analysis of the transcendental style in the films of Ozu, Paul Schrader (1972) reinforced *mono no aware* with Zen (...), Richie followed suit in his own book on Ozu. Noël Burch also delved into Zen, as well as Heian court poetry, in his study of the master’s ‘systematization of those traits which are most specifically Japanese.’ Whereas Richie himself gave some socially critical films high ratings in the 1960s, the main trend in Japanese film criticism on the 1970s and 1980s was to determine the best films according to traditional aesthetic standards.¹²²

Because of this popular trend in Western research on Japanese cinema, Western analyses of the contents of Japanese film have also become very one-sided and similar: “Everyone seems compelled to bring up Zen or *mono no aware* or something else traditional.” This obvious similarity among researchers is approaching conformity, and has not developed much,

¹¹⁷ Desser, “Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film,” 153.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 154.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 153-154.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 154.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Gregory Barrett, *Archetypes in Japanese Film: The Sociopolitical and Religious Significance of the Principal Heroes and Heroines* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1989), 15.

according to Barrett.¹²³ While the observations of both Barrett (1989) and Desser (1992) are made some 20 years ago, they are nevertheless still relevant and something to bear in mind before beginning the analysis of the nine recent period films.

To continue with the subgenre of Zen fighters, Desser suggests that it differs from the previously mentioned nostalgic and anti-feudal dramas in that it is more detached from the historical and social contexts of its time. While the two previous subgenres are more closely linked to the characters' social rank in the hierarchy of the Tokugawa period, the Zen fighter films moves away from the classic motif of nobility of failure and has transcended the forces and constraints of *giri/ninjō*. The Zen hero shows his disdain for life by fighting to the bitter end and it is here that Desser finds "the paradoxical way of Zen"; the hero does not care if he dies and precisely because of this paradox, he manages to survive. According to Zen it is through the act of letting go and being aware of the illusory nature of material life, and if you do that, you may attain a greater peace within yourself. The Zen fighter, with his disdain for life, is thus liberated from all worldly considerations. Although Zen philosophy states that the best swordsman never has to use his sword, the spiritual development of the Zen fighter happens through perfecting his skills with the blade, which happens in countless duels. One classic Zen fighter is Miyamoto Musashi, who has been portrayed in countless films from the very beginning of Japanese film and up until the present time. One of these films is *Samurai I: Musashi Miyamoto* by Inagaki.¹²⁴

Another example of Miyamoto films is Uchida Tomu's multipart series for Tōei studios, *Miyamoto Musashi* (1962-1970). Compared to Inagaki's trilogy, Uchida's *Miyamoto Musashi* series is completely different in characterization and technique. However, these films have one shared characteristic: the Tokugawa society is nothing more than a setting for Musashi's "ethical, moral, and 'duelistic' impulses."¹²⁵ Zen fighters such as Musashi remove themselves from the limitations of the moral codes of *bushidō* so that they may reach perfection in the art of swordsmanship. A representative shot of Musashi shows him as an obsessed man who openly and shamelessly tests his skills as a swordsman. Many other *jidaigeki* films also include principles of the Zen fighter, especially the nostalgic samurai drama, to which the earlier mentioned Inagaki's trilogy could be said to belong, and the sword film, or *chanbara*,

¹²³ Barrett, *Archetypes in Japanese Film*, 16.

¹²⁴ Desser, "Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film," 154-155.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 154.

which is the fourth subgenre of *jidaigeki*, from which two characters from Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (Kanbei and Kyūzō) typify the Zen swordsman.¹²⁶ Advancing beyond historical conditions and the *giri/ninjō* opposition, proceeding with a clearer focus on sword fights and a general increase of violent content within this subgenre, provided the basis for a new development in the postwar *jidaigeki* genre, namely the *chanbara*.¹²⁷

3.4.4 *Chanbara* – the sword film

The fourth and last of Desser's presentations of prewar *jidaigeki* subgenres is the sword film, or the *chanbara*. Naturally, the *chanbara* has much in common with the other *jidaigeki* subgenres mentioned above. The hero is usually a *rōnin*, or he will lose his status and become one. The plot takes place, almost without exception, in the Tokugawa era, but, as in the Zen fighters subgenre, the society often simply functions as an empty backdrop used to stage impressive duels. As in most films focusing on samurai, the *chanbara* predictably reaches its climax with a duel.¹²⁸ Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (*Yōjinbō*, 1961) marks the beginning of a revolution in the history of *chanbara*. Characteristically described as a "Japanese Western," *Yojimbo* has in fact much in common with American gangster films as well, and the incorporation of elements from the Western and gangster genres assist in changing the tradition of the *jidaigeki*. Particularly the introduction of classic western (and gangster) elements such as the "gun for hire" and the "pivotal role of an interestingly personified antagonist."¹²⁹

To begin with the hired gun, he is a popular formulaic protagonist in American action genres, and Desser sees him as a manifestation of "competitive capitalism". While the Zen hero polished his skills in a pursuit for "transcendence through action," the hired gun perfects his skills "in order to secure an edge in the marketplace." With a fast draw and deadly aim, the skills of the gun hero can be bought by anyone who bids the highest sum. A common way to distinguish between the gun hero and the villain is that the hero is naturally a man of justice; he will switch his allegiance if he feels that the cause is unjust. The villain, on the other hand, will remain merely an employee. The gun-for-hire element is transferred (to a small degree) to the nostalgic samurai drama, such as *Seven Samurai*, but with less emphasis on the "hire" aspect. The amount of money exchanged is usually small, and added to that is the relationship

¹²⁶ Desser, "Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film," 154-155.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 155.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 156.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

which consequently is established between the hero and the people he protects. Comparatively, in the *chanbara* the hero may actually require, and receive, large amounts of money for his services and this signifies a break with *bushidō*, the virtues of the samurai, which explicitly taught to renounce, and contempt, money.¹³⁰

Another development the *chanbara* brought about was to give the antagonist an increased, extended part. In the nostalgic and anti-feudal dramas, the antagonist was usually a nameless soldier whom the audience did not know or care about in any way, and would be “one in the crowd” of a large army in the decisive battle against the lone hero. In the Zen fighters subgenre it was necessary with an antagonist because the Zen hero had to come up against an enemy with respectable fighting skills of his own in order to show the risk the hero was willing to take in order to fulfill his quest for perfection. Still, in the Zen fighter film the antagonist was mostly valuable because he was good with a sword. In the *chanbara*, the antagonist has a more dominant part. In many Westerns the hero becomes significant in direct relation to the villain he has to confront. Also, the villain and the hero are matching oppositions, meaning they typically share some connection; they are hired guns, civil war veterans, former friends, etc. The *chanbara* proposes a similar pattern. In the postwar period film, the villains are for the first time personified. They are now powerful and believable opponents with personalities and motivations. In both the western and the *jidaigeki* genres it is typical to see the same actors play hero and villain in different movies to further secure this connection.¹³¹

Desser suggests that if the *chanbara* has an “underlying philosophy”, it must be nihilism. This subgenre does little, if anything, to honor the strict moral codes of Confucianism or *bushidō*. Instead, there is an abundance of meaningless death and destruction usually generated by egoistic desires such as greed, revenge and jealousy. The *chanbara* film climaxes in a “a virtual slaughterfest,” according to Desser, but the nihilism that is the basis for the *chanbara* film does not only come to expression via a large number of deaths, their graphic character, or the hero’s obvious relishing of them. It is also visible in the degree to which the hero surrenders to hopelessness. In this subgenre, the *ronin* heroes have no future, and no matter if they choose the path of the moralistic hero or of a paid assassin, they will not find peace and quiet. They lead tragic lives, but it is a different kind of tragedy than that of

¹³⁰ Desser, “Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film,” 156-157.

¹³¹ Ibid., 157.

the hero in the nostalgic or anti-feudal dramas because it does not create a sense of *mono no aware*. This is evident in the way the *chanbara* reduces people to graphic elements, and that heroism is ultimately meaningless, as is a search for self-perfection. The depiction of violence is a natural element in *chanbara*, and its explicitness (often in color and in Cinemascope) is evident: “fountains of blood emerging from headless bodies, of severed limbs flying through the air.”¹³² The high number of deaths in the films is also a common, and expected component of this subgenre. Thus, the *chanbara*, although highly stylized, gives its audience a darker view of the human condition than the other subgenres discussed. Exemplified with what Desser terms “one of the paradigmatic series in this subgenre”, namely the *Sword of Vengeance* series from the 1970s (also known as *Lone Wolf and Cub*, or *Kozure Ōkami I-VI*) and the old *Zatoichi* series with Katsu Shintarō, *chanbara* films gradually lose their realism and “enter a realm of magic and mystery” and the number of antagonists that the hero is able to dispatch in one battle, increases with the sense of fantasy.¹³³

3.4.5 The influence of Kurosawa: *Seven Samurai*

One can of course only hint at the influence of Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai*, since an exhaustive analysis of this film would divert the focus of the thesis. Repeated patterns of themes and of visual style in Kurosawa’s films have been widely analyzed by critics. The aesthetics and critical success of Kurosawa’s *chanbara Seven Samurai* “laid a genre foundation on which most filmmakers rely to this day”¹³⁴ and it frequently figures in various lists of the greatest films of all time. Therefore, in the following paragraphs I will give an introduction to the influence of this film and illustrate this with the final battle sequence.

The film takes place in 1587 during the Sengoku period of Japan (ca. 1467-1600), also known as the Warring States period.¹³⁵ It follows the story of a village of farmers harassed by an army of bandits who steal crops and abduct the women of the village. The villagers ask the aid of a *rōnin* who in turn gathers others, till they end up as a motley group of seven *rōnin* samurai who are as outside society as the bandits they are hired to fight. They plan the defense of the village and carry it out.

¹³² Desser, “Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film,” 158.

¹³³ Desser, “Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film,” 158, 162.

¹³⁴ Alain Silver, *The Samurai Film* (expanded and revised edition), (Woodstock and New York: The Overlook Press, 2005), 239.

¹³⁵ It was a time of social upheaval, political intrigue, and nearly constant military conflict. The period would eventually lead to the unification of political power in Japan under the Tokugawa shogunate.

In making *Seven Samurai*, Kurosawa created a new style: He used telephoto lenses for the first time to capture detail. When the bandits attack, men and horses gather to create a sense of solidity. Kurosawa also used multiple cameras and captured the battle from numerous angles. This made him able to cut directly from one perspective to another without stopping the action.¹³⁶ The filmmaker's intention with the film was to make a new type of *jidaigeki* by destroying "clichés and dead formulas" to renew the Japanese period film as a genre. He wanted to show the past more accurately, so he searched for correct historical facts about how the samurai truly lived in the Tokugawa period, and ended up basing the film upon the historical fact that samurai sometimes worked as watchmen for farmers in exchange for meals. At the same time, he wanted the film to have a contemporary sensibility to it, and so he appealed to the emotions of the audience.¹³⁷ Yoshimoto points out that although Kurosawa had an interest in showing the past as it really was, *jidaigeki* is still not a history film, and therefore *Seven Samurai* is not an authentic reproduction of the past.¹³⁸

The realism of the film comes from the attention to, and presentation of small details that are largely neglected in traditional *jidaigeki* such as plot and story, character traits, sets and props, costumes, and acting style. The seven *rōnin* are gentle, noble, laughing men who embody a humanity that the stylized characters in other *jidaigeki* lack because of the genre's strong early connection to traditional theater forms and its focus on keeping to the genre conventions, such as heroic men of honor ready to die fighting for the *bushidō* code and so on. Kurosawa portrayed them as individual men from all walks of life: the older, wiser leader (Kanbei), the wild, unwashed farmer (Kikuchiyo), the focused master swordsman and epitome of the *bushidō* ideal, ready to die in an instant (Kyūzō), the cheerful, good-natured second-rate swordsman (Heihachi), the young tenacious newcomer (Katsuhiko) and so on.

In *Seven Samurai*, when the samurai and villagers prepare for the bandits' attack, it is shown in a meticulous fashion. There is a sequence an hour before the final battle where two of the samurai peacefully stroll through the village with a map, planning their strategies, inspecting and surveying the land. They build new fences, destroy a bridge and irrigate a rice field to block the bandits' access to the village. In the final battle against the bandits, we get to see if

¹³⁶ Richie, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film*, 171.

¹³⁷ Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema*, 205.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 242.

their plans were successful, and in the end, the topography of the battle terrain is already familiar to us. The battle sequences are not the standard fare of stylized dance as one could see in a typical Tōei *jidaigeki* at the time, but at the same time they are not mere athletic demonstrations of dynamic movement. How one uses his sword, is not important, even farming tools are used as weapons. The heavy rain makes the ground muddy, dragging the samurai and the villagers down, and thus the fierce, realistic battle becomes a matter of survival rather than of style.¹³⁹

The final battle depicts the bandits charging into the village being defended by the villagers and the seven samurai. It rains heavily and the torrent and wind form a constant background noise throughout the scene, making the battle violence more realistic. The scene makes use of dramatic and vibrant sound perspective, such as the distant horses' hooves that are heard off-screen when the bandits are coming, drawing our attention away from the defenders and to the arrival of the attackers. Then Kurosawa cuts to a long shot of the bandits and the sound of the horses' hooves suddenly become louder. The closer the camera is to a sound source, the louder the sound. When the bandits arrive, another sound element appears with them; their battle cries, which steadily rises in volume as they approach. The dramatic sound stream of the battle scene is an intense mix of real sounds that are gradually introduced and that turn our attention to new narrative elements such as the horses' hooves and battle cries. The relatively harmonious sound stream is broken off by sharp, clear sounds of unexpected volume or pitch accompanying essential narrative actions, such as the screams of the wounded, the short hollow twanging sound of a samurai's bowstring, the sharp crack of a bandit's rifle shot and so on. In these final battle scenes, Kurosawa eliminates music, successfully heightening the action's impact.¹⁴⁰ We feel each death and it is indelicate, merciless and primitive. Several significant deaths are represented in slow motion, so that we may reflect over their meaning. Other times, deaths happen at a regular speed making their importance overshadowed by the chaos of battle.

¹³⁹ Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema*, 243-244.

¹⁴⁰ Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 278-279.

4 Analysis

In this chapter I will compare and analyze the selected nine period films, released between 1997 and 2012, as stated in the introductory chapter. I will not separate each film to analyze them on individual terms. To fully discuss and analyze each film on its own would require more time and space than this thesis allows. If I had chosen a smaller selection of films from a shorter time span, separate analyses would have been possible. However, that would not only have limited and narrowed down the variety and diversity of the films represented, it would also make it more difficult to find their shared characteristics, cinematic codes, narrative patterns, style and so on, and to find what sets them apart from each other.

The structure of this chapter begins with plot overviews of the nine *jidaigeki* I have selected to introduce the major lines of the stories. It continues with the narrative structures of the films, where I will draw comparisons between the earlier patterns and discuss whether or not there are narrative developments distinguishable, and which elements remain as minor variations of the traditional narratives. After the narrative section, I will move on to compare and analyze genre formulas and style conventions, also essential elements to understand the possible developments within the Japanese period film. There are some similar elements in the recent films that have sprung out from earlier formulas and stylistic codes, but there are also developments to be found. *Mise-en-scène* and cinematography will be dealt with on a secondary level, since my focus has been kept on narrative and thematic developments of the Japanese period film. How has the Japanese period film genre, the *jidaigeki*, evolved since the prewar era and up until the present time? How have *jidaigeki* films changed and developed through the decades in terms of narrative structures, genre formulas and style conventions? In which sense are these contemporary films different and/or similar from older *jidaigeki* from the prewar and postwar periods, and how can the new ones be said to have changed genre codes?

4.1 Plots

Before embarking on the analysis, it is essential to offer a plot presentation of the nine contemporary Japanese period films selected. The film plots are presented in chronological order: starting in 1998 with *Samurai Fiction*, moving towards the end of the millennium with

1999's *Gohatto*, before *Gojoe* from 2000, continuing with *The Twilight Samurai* from 2002, *Zatoichi* from 2003 and *The Hidden Blade* from 2004, and finally ending with the last releases, all three from 2010: *13 Assassins*, *Abacus and Sword* and *Scabbard Samurai*.

4.1.1 Samurai Fiction

Samurai Fiction (SF: Episode One). Year of release: 1998. Directed by Nakano Hiroyuki. Produced by Pony Canyon and Tokyo Shock. Screenplay by Nakano Hiroyuki and Saitō Hiroshi. Cinematography by Yajima Yujiro. Edited by Nakano Hiroyuki. Music by Hotei Tomoyasu. With Kazama Morio, Fukikoshi Mitsuru, Hotei Tomoyasu, Ogawa Tamaki, Natsuki Mari et al.

Samurai Fiction starts off with a countdown from 1998 to 300 years before. In voice-over, the reincarnated soul of the samurai Inukai Heishirō tells of his experiences as a young samurai in Japan during the Tokugawa period. The year is 1696 and 21-year old Heishirō learns that his clan's precious ceremonial sword has been stolen. If the sword is not found and offered as a gift of loyalty to the *shōgun* on time, war will certainly break out. The culprit is the renegade swordsman Kazamatsuri who is not one to be trifled with. Untroubled by the idea that dueling with Kazamatsuri would most likely end in his own death, Heishirō sets off to recapture the treasured blade accompanied by his two best friends. Eventually, they catch up with Kazamatsuri, but a local retired samurai intervenes to rescue them. Heishirō is badly wounded and to help him recover, the old samurai brings him to his house. Heishirō begins to prepare for his eventual confrontation with Kazamatsuri to revenge his friends. As it turns out, the old man is in fact the master samurai Mizoguchi Hanbei, who now promotes a life of peace rather than follow the way of the warrior, and he is eventually able to convince Heishirō to fight Kazamatsuri by throwing rocks rather than using his sword. Since Kazamatsuri is unable to find anybody to match him in battle, he kidnaps Mizoguchi's daughter Koharu in an effort to get the old swordsman to duel with him. Mizoguchi joins Heishirō to find Kazamatsuri and rescue Koharu. Heishirō tells Koharu that he will marry her if Mizoguchi wins. Mizoguchi disarms Kazamatsuri near a steep cliff, and admitting his defeat, Kazamatsuri jumps off the cliff and kills himself. Kazamatsuri's body is nowhere to be found, but Koharu catches sight of the clan sword at the bottom of the river. One year later, Heishirō and Koharu are happily married, the sword is where it belongs and Mizoguchi has now become a clan official.

4.1.2 Gohatto¹⁴¹

Gohatto (also known by its other English title *Taboo*) (*Gohatto*). Year of release: 1999. Directed by Ōshima Nagisa. Produced by Oshima Productions, Shōchiku Eiga, Kadokawa Shoten Publishing Company, et al. Screenplay by Ōshima Nagisa, based on short stories by Shiba Ryōtarō. Cinematography by Kurita Toyomichi. Edited by Oshima Tomoyo. Music by Sakamoto Ryūichi. With Kitano Takeshi (as ‘Beat’ Takeshi), Matsuda Ryūhei, Takeda Shinji, Asano Tadanobu, Sai Yōichi et al.

Gohatto is set in Kyoto in 1865, in the last turbulent years of the Tokugawa period, three years before the Meiji Restoration. The Shinsengumi¹⁴² is selecting new recruits in presence of commander Kondō Isami and his deputy commander Hijikata Toshizō. The candidates have to take on the best warrior of the force, Okita Sōji, to prove their talents. On this day, two men stand out from the rest and join the militia: Tashiro Hyōzō, a lower-ranking samurai, and Kanō Sōzaburō, an androgynous teenage boy with bewitching features. His appearance makes many of the others in the (strictly male) group, both students and superiors, attracted to him. Kanō is a very skilled swordsman and more than capable of defending himself from unwanted sexual advances, and combined with his good looks, he wins favor with commander Kondō. Hijikata, who suspects that something other than manly appreciation is going on between Kanō and Tashiro, also seems overly interested in the young boy. Tashiro snuggles up with Kanō nightly; he too has fallen for him and gets jealous. This creates tension within the brotherhood of the strictly organized Shinsengumi. Officially homosexuality is prohibited, but the leaders tend to turn a blind eye as long as the relationships do not disturb the social hierarchy of the group. However, the penalty for any violation of the rules is death. Still, there is no shortage of candidates willing to lose their heads over Kanō. Then, the Shinsengumi man Yuzawa, who has had a sexual relation with Kanō, is reported murdered by a comrade. Tashiro and Kanō become main suspects, and the Shinsengumi commanders decide to order Kanō to kill Tashiro. Hijikata and Okita will watch the forced encounter from afar, but are not under any circumstances allowed to interrupt the fight. Kanō kills Tashiro in the duel, but the ending offers us little resolution and Hijikata is left with the same questions as us.

¹⁴¹ The title *Gohatto* is an old-fashioned term that can be translated as “against the law”. Nowadays, “*gohatto*” can be translated as “strictly forbidden” or “taboo”.

¹⁴² The Shinsengumi militia was a factual, historical troop whose legendary duty it was to suppress the rebellions and reformist forces that threatened the Tokugawa Shogunate.

4.1.3 Gojoe

Gojoe (also known by its full English title *Gojoe: Spirit War Chronicle*) (*Gojo: reisenki*). Year of release: 2000. Directed by Ishii Sōgo. Produced by Suncent Cinema Works, Tōhō Company and WoWow. Screenplay by Ishii Sōgo and Nakajima Goro. Cinematography by Watanabe Makoto. Edited by Kakesu Shūichi. Music by Onogawa Hiroyuki. With Asano Tadanobu, Nagase Masatoshi, Ryū Daisuke, Funaki Masakatsu, Kunimura Jun et al.

The film is set in Kyoto in the Heian period (794-1185). At the gate of Gojō Bridge an invisible, demonic force has been attacking members of the Heike clan, violently beheading them in swift strikes. The rumors start to spread of a demon that is out to collect one thousand Heike souls. The warrior monk Benkei is trying to make amends for his past as a murderer and bad guy by dedicating his new life to meditation and Buddhism. Benkei has had a vision, and convinced that he is spiritually appointed to fight the evil force, Benkei arrives at Gojō Bridge and teams up with a cynical sword scavenger. The demon is in fact a real person, the young Genji clan prince Shanao, who has gone into hiding. Shanao's hatred for the Heike clan has grown into madness and a craving for revenge on his murdered family. He will adopt the name Yoshitsune and become the leader for the Genji clan, and as preparation, Shanao has secretly perfected his sword fighting skills by killing Heike soldiers in the night. In order to attain the full potential of his higher powers, Shanao considers Benkei the only human left as a worthy opponent. Shanao and Benkei eventually meet at the bridge where they unleash their spiritual powers onto one another, and the Gojō bridge is set ablaze. In the fiery chaos that ensues, Benkei and prince Shanao disappears. Not far away from the bridge, the Genji clan priest waits for Shanao's escort warriors, who will take the prince to the Genji clan's stronghold. The priest tells the approaching Genji warriors that the bridge is on fire and that there was an incident with the Heike, but now everything has been "made clear". He presents to them "the lost son of Yoshitomo", but the man appearing in front of the warriors, is in fact prince Shanao's young retainer, who tells them that he will now rule as "Yoshitsune" of the Genji. With the false prince Shanao, the clan priest presents another bluff; prince Shanao's second retainer is introduced as Musashibo Benkei, "the most famous warrior monk in Kyoto" who has now aligned with the Genji clan.

4.1.4 The Twilight Samurai

The Twilight Samurai (Tasogare Seibei). Year of release: 2002. Directed by Yamada Yōji. Produced by Shochiku Company, Nippon Television Network, Sumitomo Corporation, et al. Screenplay by Yamada Yōji and Asama Yoshitaka, from novels by Fujisawa Shūhei. Cinematography by Naganuma Mutsuo. Edited by Ishii Iwao. Music by Tomita Isao. With Sanada Hiroyuki, Miyasawa Rie, Kobayashi Nenji, Ōsugi Ren, Fukikoshi Mitsuru et al.

Set in the last days of the Tokugawa period, *The Twilight Samurai* follows low-ranking samurai Iguchi Seibei, who works in the clan's grain warehouse. It is Seibei's youngest daughter Ito, now an old woman, who tells the story of her father in retrospect. Seibei is nicknamed Tasogare (meaning "twilight") because he always goes right home to his family after work and never goes out to drink with his fellow co-workers because of familial duties; he has two young daughters, a mother aging into senility, and his wife has passed away. He is heavily in debt, dresses shabbily, and never even has time to bathe properly because he has to try to maintain the household as well, and he is a kind and loving parent for his two daughters. He feels that he cannot take another wife and subject her to a life of poverty and hard work, even though he has long been in love with Tomoe, a childhood friend. Seibei is, however, more than capable with a sword, so when a renegade samurai barricades himself in his house, the clan decides to send Seibei in to kill him. When he asks Tomoe if she would be his wife should he win the duel (he was promised an increased stipend if he manages to defeat the rebel samurai), he learns that she has accepted the proposal of another man since Seibei had rejected her previously. When Seibei returns home victorious, he finds Tomoe still waiting for him, and she becomes his wife. Less than three years later, however, Seibei is killed in the civil war following the abdication of the *shōgun*.

4.1.5 Zatoichi

Zatoichi (also known by its full English title *The Blind Swordsman: Zatoichi*) (*Zatōichi*). Year of release: 2003. Directed by Kitano Takeshi. Produced by Asahi National Broadcasting Company, Office Kitano, Shochiku Company, et al. Screenplay by Kitano Takeshi, from novels by Shimosawa Kan. Cinematography by Yanagijima Katsumi. Edited by Kitano Takeshi and Ōta Yoshinori. Music by Suzuki Keiichi. With Kitano Takeshi, Asano Tadanobu, Ōkusu Michiyo, Taka Gadarukanaru, Tachibana Daigorō et al.

Set in the Tokugawa period, a wandering blind masseur (played by director Kitano Takeshi himself) arrives in a village; but he is no ordinary masseur, he is Zatōichi, an expert swordsman with his weapon concealed in his walking stick. He befriends Oume, a kind woman who manages a farm on her own. She describes to Zatōichi how the villagers are being harassed by two local gangs who have teamed up and are led by *yakuza* bosses Ginzo and Ogi. The gangs run the town as they please and force the townspeople and farmers to pay excessive amounts of protection money. Meanwhile, two parallel narratives unfold: one of an unhappy *rōnin* named Hattori, who must work as Ginzo's bodyguard to earn money to treat his ill wife, and the other of two *geisha* siblings on a mission to avenge their family's murder. After a night out gambling, Zatōichi and Oume's nephew Shinkichi encounter the two *geisha* named Okinu and Osei, and Zatōichi senses that they are not what they seem. Realizing they are no match for him, Osei and Okinu tell their story, and are taken in by Oume. When the *geisha* discover that Ogi is responsible for killing their family, they set out to get their revenge, but are ambushed by the gangs of Ginzo and Ogi, who have set up a trap. Zatōichi comes to their rescue and the two narrative threads come together when he must defeat Ginzo's bodyguard Hattori in order to end the criminals' reign of terror.

4.1.6 The Hidden Blade

The Hidden Blade (*Kakushi ken oni no tsume*). Year of release: 2004. Directed by Yamada Yōji. Produced by Shochiku Company, Nippon Television Network, Sumitomo Corporation, et al. Screenplay by Yamada Yōji and Asama Yoshitaka, from short stories by Fujisawa Shūhei. Cinematography by Naganuma Mutsuo. Edited by Ishii Iwao. Music by Tomita Isao. With Nagase Masatoshi, Matsu Takako, Yoshioka Hidetaka, Ozawa Yukiyo, Tabata Tomoko et al.

In this second period piece of Yamada's samurai trilogy, we return to the end of the Tokugawa period, with modern times ahead. It is 1861 and samurai Katagiri Munezō of the Unasaka clan bids farewell to his old friend Hazama Yaichirō, who has accepted an important clan posting in the capital city of Edo. Munezō finds himself torn between loyalty to a dying tradition and his love for the lowly farm girl Kie, who is the family maid. Unmarried Munezō has lived modestly with his mother and sister Shino since his father was forced into suicide. Time passes, Munezō's sister marries, his mother dies, Kie is married into a merchant family, and Munezō himself, still unmarried, is required to learn western methods of warfare from an

eager Edo official. One day Munezō learns that Kie is ill from abuse by her husband and his family, and rescues her. His feelings for Kie are mutual, but Munezō knows that he cannot marry someone of her inferior social standing. Munezō's old friend Yaichirō is implicated in a plot against the shogunate, and is denied the honor of ritual suicide. He is shipped back home in disgrace in a "prisoner's basket" and imprisoned in solitary confinement, but he escapes and Munezō is ordered by the chief retainer of the clan, lord Hori, to kill him. Even if Yaichirō was always considered the more brilliant swordsman when they studied together, Munezō is the only one to be entrusted with the secret of the "Hidden Blade" from sword master Toda. Yaichirō's wife attempts to convince Munezō to spare her husband's life, she is even offering to sleep with him, but Munezō refuses. She also visits Hori. Munezō fights Yaichirō and wins, but he is horrified and disappointed to see his friend gunned down by riflemen from the clan. He discovers that chief retainer Hori has slept with Yaichirō's wife with the promise to spare Yaichirō, a promise he never had any intention of keeping. Enraged, Munezō uses his Hidden Blade technique to kill Hori, hoping this will allow Yaichirō and his wife, who now has committed suicide, to rest in peace. In the epilogue, Munezo has renounced his samurai status and become a merchant to be able to marry Kie and they move to the north.

4.1.7 13 Assassins

13 Assassins (*Jūsannin no shikaku*). Year of release: 2010. Directed by Miike Takashi. Produced by Sedic International Inc., TV Asahi Corporation, Tōhō Company, et al. Screenplay by Tengan Daisuke, based on a screenplay by Ikegami Kaneo. Cinematography by Kita Nobuyasu. Edited by Yamashita Kenji. Music by Endō Kōji. With Yakusho Kōji, Yamada Takayuki, Iseya Yūsuke, Sawamura Ikki, Furuta Arata et al.

13 Assassins is set in the Tokugawa period, in 1844, when the era of the samurai is waning. A group of *rōnin* is recruited to bring down the shogun's sadistic young half-brother, lord Naritsugu. He is heir to the Akashi clan, but does not act like one; he terrorizes and brutalizes his people. Senior government official Doi Toshitsura realizes that lord Naritsugu will ruin the shogunate after he rises in power. As Naritsugu's evil deeds are quickly hushed up, sir Doi must act. Unable to legally take action against any member of the ruling shogunate, sir Doi secretly puts the aging, but highly skilled samurai Shimada Shinzaemon in charge of gathering a group of assassins to bring down lord Naritsugu. The first half of the film is spent

by planning the assassination, and to recruit a dozen, more-or-less combative samurai. A carefully orchestrated ambush begins. When lord Naritsugu finally approaches the village, he has brought two hundred soldiers, far more than the number the assassins initially expected. This leads us the second half of the film: a fifty minutes long violence spree. The thirteen assassins fall one by one as they wreak havoc upon lord Naritsugu's guards. Finally, lord Naritsugu is left with his most loyal guard Hanbei, who once trained in the same school of sword fighting as Shinzaemon.

4.1.8 Abacus and Sword

Abacus and Sword (Bushī no kakeibo). Year of release: 2010. Directed by Morita Yoshimitsu. Produced by Asmik Ace Entertainment, Shochiku Company, Dentsu, et al. Screenplay by Kashiwada Michio, based on a novel by Isoda Michifumi. Cinematography by Okimura Yukihiro. Edited by Kawashima Akimasa. Music by Ōshima Michiru. With Sakai Masato, Nakama Yukie, Ito Yuki, Matsuzaka Keiko, Nishimura Masahiko et al.

Set in Japan from the 1830s to 1877, *Abacus and Sword* covers the late Tokugawa period, the Meiji Restoration and the first decade of the Meiji period (1868-1912). The protagonist is workaholic accountant Naoyuki, who belongs to the eighth generation of the wealthy Inoyama family, renowned for finance and bookkeeping. Being a very gifted mathematician who is skilled with, and devoted to, the abacus, fellow workers dub Naoyuki "The Mad Abacist". His parents arrange for him to marry Koma, and Naoyuki builds a home and a family for himself. Koma and Naoyuki have a son, Naokichi (who later takes the name Nariyuki), who narrates the film as an adult. Suffering financial hardship, Naoyuki imposes a severe austerity regime at home; they have to live carefully and sell most of their possessions to reduce debt. While exposed to the prying eyes of people in the neighborhood and co-workers, the people of the Inoyama household carry out their stingy lifestyle. As Naokichi gets older, his father's strict teaching annoys him more and more and he would rather learn the way of the samurai. When a war is waged against the remaining *shōgun*, Nariyuki (now in his early twenties) is among the warriors. Still, he comes to realize the value of his father's teachings as the film nears the end.

4.1.9 Scabbard Samurai

Scabbard Samurai (Saya-zamurai). Year of release: 2010. Directed by Matsumoto Hitoshi. Produced by Kyoraku Sangyo, Phantom Film, Shochiku Company, et al. Screenplay by Takasu Mitsuyoshi, Hasegawa Tomoji, Ema Kōji, Kumamoto Mitsuru, Itao Itsuji and Matsumoto Hitoshi. Cinematography by Kondō Ryūto. Edited by Honda Yoshitaka. Music by Shimizu Yasuaki. With Nomi Takaaki, Kumada Sea, Itao Itsuji, Emoto Tokio, Kunimura Jun et al.

Set in the Tokugawa period, *Scabbard Samurai* tells the tale of disgraced *rōnin* Nomi Kanjūrō. Nomi is wanted for treason after losing his sword and deserting his clan and there is a price on his head. Soldiers from another clan capture Nomi and his daughter. The local *daimyō* has branded Nomi a deserter and ordered him to avenge his honor by committing *seppuku* (ritual suicide for disgraced samurai) right away. Nomi is, however, granted a final chance to avoid this fate; he can entertain the *daimyō*'s young son, who has lost the ability to smile after the death of his mother. Nomi has thirty days to make the prince smile again, and if he succeeds before the month is out, his life will be spared and he will be free. Otherwise, he will die trying. Nomi is the thirteenth prisoner to attempt the thirty-day feat and so far no man has succeeded. Starting out with small tricks and jokes, playing the clown for the *daimyō* and his son, he fails miserably. Nomi is put through a wide variety of physical humiliations, and every time with the same result: Nomi's attempts fail to amuse the prince. Nomi's own passivity and glumness encourage his two jail guards to take over the responsibility of coming up with new, creative and ridiculous stunts for Nomi to perform. The stunts intensify in scale and risk. Nomi's acts improve, but the little prince is still not satisfied. The final day of challenge arrives, and that project fails, too. Feeling sorry for Nomi, the *daimyō* gives him one more chance to make his son laugh before he must commit *seppuku* the next day. The crowd cheers and everyone are hopeful. Nomi is supposed to say one last, unexpected joke to make the young prince smile, but instead, he chooses to keep his honor and dignity by committing *seppuku* right away.

4.2 Narrative structure

In this part, I will compare the narrative structures and patterns of the nine contemporary *jidaigeki* with an emphasis on possible similarities and developments from the prewar through the postwar period and onwards, as elaborated in the previous chapter. With the help of some prevalent characteristics that I have found to be common to one or more of the films,

I will explain how these particular characteristics are highlighted and employed. Or, if the films differ from the characteristics, how do they modify and develop them? To support my analysis, I will give examples from the selection of recent films and refer to the early narrative characteristics of the Japanese period film from the prewar and postwar periods in order to link contemporary *jidaigeki* with its historical past.

4.2.1 Prewar narrative “relics”

The prewar narratives that I explained in chapter three are recognizable in the nine contemporary *jidaigeki* films, but to various degrees. Some films, like *Samurai Fiction*, have one of the prewar narratives at its foundation. Other films can be seen rather as variations of such narratives because that particular narrative link is not all-encompassing in the films, such as with *The Twilight Samurai* and *Zatoichi*. Still others have only a vague connection to prewar narratives, which is the case with *Gohatto*. The prewar *torimono* narrative, focusing on feudal-style law enforcement, would have been an appropriate framework for *Gohatto* and its portrayal of the Shinsengumi, but the connection between the two is too weak, since the focus of the film is not the capturing of criminals, but rather homosexuality as a common source of desire and division within the Shinsengumi. *Gojoe* is the only film among the nine that could have been argued to belong to the prewar narrative of trick photography because of the link to the spiritual and occult. This is however a sketchy category, since it includes early examples of special effects, and none of the contemporary *jidaigeki* are particularly primitive. Instead, this narrative may be considered as a precursor to today’s CGI special effects in film, a representation of film technological advancement that also present-day *jidaigeki* employ. In addition to *Gojoe*, *13 Assassins* and *Zatoichi* also frequently use CGI effects in various scenes, but digital technology in these films is not a topic I will look into as it is outside the limitations of the thesis.

The narrative in *The Twilight Samurai* can be argued to be a variation of the prewar narrative *Ōie-sōdō* (disorder in a great house), since the political condition of Japan divides the clan’s politics. The tension between the faction of reformers and the faction of conservatives within the clan escalates when the young clan lord suddenly dies of illness and there is confusion around who should succeed him. As history tells us, the restoration would mean the end of the samurai class and the sword would be replaced by modern technology, and this is a theme explored in both older period films from the 1960s, such as Kurosawa’s *Yojimbo* (1961), but

also in more recent films such as *When the Last Sword is Drawn* (*Mibu gishi den*, 2003) by Takita Yōjirō.¹⁴³ In the Tokugawa period, at the time when *The Twilight Samurai* takes place, the national political situation that provides the backdrop of the film may be explained on account of its setting. The story in *The Twilight Samurai* takes place right before a final conflict between the pro-shogunate clans and the pro-restoration clans over the matter of opening up the country to the West, a situation that the emperor resists. Another film where it is possible to argue for *Ōie-sōdō* narrative is in *Abacus and Sword* where Naoyuki exposes a conspiracy involving rice theft. The 1830s marked a protracted famine in Japan, so clan administrators rationed out rice to the people. When Naoyuki reports the crime to his superiors, they are unwilling to investigate because they are in fact selling the rice at a profit to other domains. This revelation earns Naoyuki enemies but also the respect of the clan lord.

In *Zatoichi* one can find the prewar narrative based on the feudal rule of promoting virtue and punishing vice, *kanzen chōaku*. Like the disguised old *daimyō* Mito Kōmon, Zatoichi's identity is a secret. He is known as a blind masseur, but inside his seemingly innocent-looking cane there is a hidden sword that he uses to kill criminals, *yakuza* and other wrongdoers. They are both wanderers who protect the weak and poor and punish evil deeds and evil people. Unlike Zatoichi who is an outsider and below the caste system, Mito Kōmon is a prominent person masquerading as a commoner. An elite samurai near the center of power, Mito Kōmon uses his authority to rescue people from various forces of evil. Other films where the *kanzen chōaku* narrative can be found are *The Twilight Samurai* (Seibei is promised an increase in his stipend if he kills Yogo) and *13 Assassins* (Sir Doi goes against his lord and hires warriors to kill him).

In one of the subplots in *Zatoichi*, where the two *geisha* siblings Osei and Okinu search for revenge on their murdered family, we can find a variation of the prewar vendetta narrative, similar to the story of the Soga brothers. The siblings have waited for ten years before they finally find the man responsible for the murder of their parents, who were wealthy merchants slaughtered by a gang of criminals who wanted their money. The siblings are the only survivors from the massacre, and during the course of the film, they discover that the people who were responsible for the murders are the same *yakuza* gang terrorizing the small village. Unlike the Soga brothers, the *geisha* siblings do not die afterwards in battle or by order of the

¹⁴³ Thornton, *The Japanese Period Film: A Critical Analysis*, 175-176.

shōgun, but they are similarly concerned with the ideas of justice and honor and get their revenge in the end. Revenge and the prewar vendetta narrative are also dominant elements in *Samurai Fiction*, where Heishirō plots a vendetta against Kazamatsuri, who has not only stolen the precious clan sword, but also killed Heishirō's friend Tadasuke. That being said, however, Heishirō is not a fearless samurai hero (although he certainly likes to think so), and his planned revenge fails, as he is not the one who eventually kills Kazamatsuri, who actually jumps off a cliff. His own defeat was not acceptable as he failed to win the duel against Mizoguchi. Although the fates of the Soga brothers and the forty-seven *rōnin* in *Chūshingura* are representative of the prewar vendetta narrative in that it ends with the demise of the protagonists, the hero's death is not a necessary element in this narrative pattern. The vendetta narrative without the elements of revenge and death of the hero can be found in *The Twilight Samurai* and *The Hidden Blade* in that both heroes place *giri* before *ninjō*, but this is necessarily a weak connection, since the natural focus of this prewar narrative is of course the vendetta.

In *13 Assassins* one can discern two prewar narratives. First the *Ōie-sōdō* narrative of clan struggles, which is evident in one of the subplots of the film where the sadistic lord Naritsugu, the younger brother of the current *shōgun*, eventually will ascend to a higher political position, and there is a clash between those who support him and those who want to stop him as the latter faction hires assassins to kill the lord. The other prewar narrative in the film, the vendetta narrative, can only be assumed very loosely. This narrative belongs to the thirteen assassins determined to stop him at all costs and that their vendetta therefore is not fought on a personal level, but on a collective level; they fight on behalf of all the victims of Naritsugu.

The legendary swordfighter narrative where the hero always wins and the focus is placed on grand battles can be found in *Zatoichi* since he always manages to win against hordes of adversaries and despite, or perhaps because of, his blindness. Warrior monk Benkei and prince Shanao (Yoshitsune) in *Gojoe* are loosely based on legendary Japanese folk heroes, but in the film they both possess demonic, supernatural powers and in the final battle they fight each other before they disappear in a flash of lightning from the sky, so it is difficult to determine if they belong to this narrative or not. Instead, it can be argued that Benkei is a working-class hero, since his background is from an outlawed band of guerilla warriors. But his motives are ultimately egoistic, as he only wishes to attain enlightenment through slaying

“the demon” prince Shanao. Seibei from *The Twilight Samurai* and Munezō from *The Hidden Blade* may be considered legendary swordfighters within the context of each film, since they are not based on historical or legendary swordfighters as far as I know. They have both trained under the same sword master, who is also a legendary figure in the film. Munezō has also learned some deadly fighting techniques from his master, which can count to his advantage when determining how much of a legendary swordfighter he is. Kazamatsuri in *Samurai Fiction* is also recognized as a legendary swordsman within the context of the film, but he eventually kills himself after admitting his defeat against another legendary swordfighter, the aging Mizoguchi Hanbei.

4.2.2 A variation of the traditional narrative

The reviews of *The Twilight Samurai* pointed to what was seen as a development in the period film. The film has been characterized by one reviewer as both “mature” and “revisionist” in which “the genre’s battery of traditions takes an evocative, real-world beating,”¹⁴⁴ and by another as “a fantastic modern samurai flick... that harkens back to the heyday of *jidai-geki* but does so in a different and unique manner” with “very real quality” violence, and that “by infusing the film with such ‘realism’ the story gets anchored and becomes more authentic.”¹⁴⁵ And the film will certainly seem different and perhaps more “real” than older film series like *Zatoichi* (*Zatōichi*, film series 1962-1989, television series 1972-1974) or *Sleepy Eyes of Death* (*Nemuri Kyōshirō*, 1956-1998)¹⁴⁶ that were released from the 1950s and 60s and onwards. Common for these and other *chanbara* films from the same period is that they feature stylized violence and performance and combine various conventions of theater and film, both Eastern and Western. Even so, Japanese traditions of production, narrative, and realism make up the core of *The Twilight Samurai*. Thus, according to Thornton, *The Twilight Samurai* is not simply referring to the past; it is firmly rooted in it. She argues that the reason lies with director Yamada’s traditional training at Shochiku Studios, and that although he was required to make one film after the other for several decades, the efficiency, tight budgets and time schedules, and demands for high rates

¹⁴⁴ Michael Atkinson, “Codes Unknown: In a Revisionist Samurai Epic, Tough Financial Realities Trump the Warrior Myth of Honor”, in *The Village Voice*, April 13, 2004, URL.

¹⁴⁵ Nicholas Rucka, a review of *Twilight Samurai*, directed by Yamada Yōji, in *Midnight Eye*, March 10, 2004, URL; Michael Atkinson, “A Hypnotic Samurai Film”, in *The Village Voice*, August 8, 2006, URL.

¹⁴⁶ *Nemuri Kyōshirō* was first released as three films by Toho Studios, from 1956 to 1958. Daiei Studios released its own series of twelve films from 1963-1969 (it is this series that has been released in English as *Sleepy Eyes of Death*), then there were two more Daiei films in 1969, with a different lead actor. The last *Nemuri Kyōshirō* series were released from 1989-1998 as four made-for-TV movie specials.

of output within the Japanese studio system also made him a filmmaking master as well as the most popular director in Japan. Moreover, the Tora-san series provided Yamada with valuable experience and perhaps the necessary framework to create his period film trilogy. The trilogy is faithful to the traditional Japanese period film and does not present any radical changes to the genre formulas, but it is a great representative of the genre as well as being a great representative of Yamada's own style. When he and his crew worked on Tora-san, not only did they create "a narrative formula, a setting, and an ensemble of characters and performers", they managed to perfect "the art of variation".¹⁴⁷ Yamada certainly used his skills in the art of variation in the samurai trilogy, where only few alterations separate the films.¹⁴⁸

In *Zatoichi*, a variation of the village festival that is commonly portrayed in earlier *jidaigeki* is found towards the end of the film, with a tap-dancing finale that may seem bizarre and unexpected, but according to director Kitano himself, the way this scene is executed is reminiscent of the traditional *kabuki* theater, in which they dance using the *geta* (traditional wooden Japanese sandals with an elevated base) like wooden tap dance shoes. On stage in a *kabuki* play, the dances are slower and more stylized than the dance in the film, but the rhythm is the same.¹⁴⁹

13 Assassins is in fact a continuation from the original 1963 version by Kudō, and the explicit violence is in fact a fresh rendering of earlier *chanbara*, and not a new characteristic of such films. The reference to Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* is also evident in the realistic depiction of the characters' deaths, which are shown subtle and simple; as bodies of flesh that die without drama or spectacle. The simplicity of the warriors' deaths might help to achieve some sort of balance to the rest of the film, where lord Naritsugu keeps himself busy in carrying out grotesque violence. The battle sequence in *13 Assassins* is about 50 minutes long and is in this way similar to the long battle scene in *Seven Samurai* as described in chapter three. There is in both films a focus on humanity amidst all the killing and bloodshed, which I also discussed earlier when focusing on the characterization in the two films. Each life is critical in that battle, it is a struggle for survival where the value of life is greatly considered, as we can see when the assassins die. An interesting point is that there is no love story in *13*

¹⁴⁷ Thornton, *The Japanese Period Film: A Critical Analysis*, 174-175.

¹⁴⁸ Thornton, *The Japanese Period Film: A Critical Analysis*, 173-174; Silver, *The Samurai Film*, 76, 79, 81.

¹⁴⁹ Kitano Takeshi, quoted in an interview by Tom Mes, in *Midnight Eye*, November 5, 2003. URL.

Assassins. This was a deliberate choice by the director, who has explained that he did not want to make a remake for today's audience: "We decided not to add any modern flavor, but to truthfully keep the great elements of the original story."¹⁵⁰ As I explained in chapter three, the iconography of women in *jidaigeki* is usually closer resembling women of today than women actually living in the Tokugawa period. In *13 Assassins*, however, this argument is not valid. We see women with painted, black teeth and shaven eyebrows, although Thornton argued this to not be the case in *jidaigeki*, since period films need a contemporary reference point. To be particular, *13 Assassins* adheres more to the principles of *chanbara* than it does *jidaigeki*, and since Thornton's point was aimed at *jidaigeki* in general, her argument is still true.

The Kurosawa link

As pointed out earlier, Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* was revolutionary partly because of its characterization of both human and humane *rōnin*. Through dialogue, facial expressions, the background stories of the characters and during the course of the film, but also through cinematic and stylistic techniques such as editing, framing, sound/music and the aspects of *mise-en-scène*, we learn to identify each of the *rōnin* through his individual character traits, and we sympathize with them, their situation and their goal to combat the bandits and save the village.

The most obvious example from the nine contemporary *jidaigeki* in this thesis is Miike's remake of *13 Assassins*, which is clearly very influenced by *Seven Samurai*, although the influences may be indirect, via Kudō's original film from 1963. There are many similar narrative structures. Examples here include the set-up of a group of *rōnin* hired to do a job apparently doomed to failure, the character types for the *rōnin* recruits, the focus on a few character traits for each type, and the painstaking process where the warriors prepare the battle; they plan their strategies and show how they create a complete battlefield within the village, complete with booby traps and the fact that the battle is confined to a village. Still, I would argue that *13 Assassins* does not focus its attention so much toward the characters as it does toward fulfilling the film's violence motif, and this aspect separates it from *Seven Samurai*, where we sympathize with all seven warriors because of their distinct character traits. Most of the thirteen *rōnin* characters in *13 Assassins* remain undefined and with rather

¹⁵⁰ Miike Takashi, quoted in an interview in the "Special Features" section of the film *13 Assassins* (2010), directed by Miike Takashi. Released by Artificial Eye.

indistinguishable personalities, but as mentioned, this is not the film's focus. The energy and brisk pace of the film is, according to the filmmaker, a way for him to resurrect the creative spirit of earlier Japanese *chanbara* films. Director Miike confirms the connection to Kurosawa when discussing his *13 Assassins*: "I don't think any Japanese film-maker can escape the influence of Kurosawa."¹⁵¹

A different Kurosawa film, namely *The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail* from 1945, briefly mentioned in chapter two, is invoked in *Scabbard Samurai*. Thematically, one can read a "struggle between feudal ideology and a more modern perception"¹⁵² in Kurosawa's film, a theme also discernible in *Scabbard Samurai* from 2010, between the old *rōnin* Nomi Kanjurō and the feudal lord who wants him to entertain his son instead of committing ritual suicide. Another similarity is between Enoken, the famous comedian who portrayed a porter in *The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail*, and Nomi Takaaki, who portrays Nomi, who is also a comedian. Nomi was discovered by the director of *Scabbard Samurai*, Matsumoto Hitoshi, another comedian. Nomi is mostly silent throughout the film, with a deadpan face, adding to the warm humor of the film in a way perhaps not so dissimilar to Enoken, whose slight raise of an eyebrow or imposing stare must have made a great impact on screen in the early silent movies, and Nomi Takaaki brings this legacy to the 21st century.

4.2.3 Cinematography: How framing emphasizes the importance of children and assists the narrative

To bind the scenes together in a logical, coherent way, a film employs different cinematographic strategies, or techniques. One such technique is framing, which serves to compose a shot to include, exclude, or emphasize certain elements. Thus, framings assist the narrative in several ways, and the repetitions of certain framings may associate themselves with a character or situation, and may become motifs unifying the film.¹⁵³ To describe formal repetitions, the most common term to use is motif, and a motif may be "an object, a color, a place, a person, a sound, or even a character trait." Similarity and repetition establish an important principle of film form, and repetition is fundamental to our understanding of any film. We have to identify and remember characters and settings each time they reappear.

¹⁵¹ Miike Takashi, "Why I am bringing Japanese classics back to life", in *The Guardian*, May 5, 2011. URL.

¹⁵² David Desser, "Ikiru: Narration as a Moral Act," in *Reframing Japanese Cinema: Authorship, Genre, History*, edited by Arthur Nalletti, Jr. and David Desser (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 58.

¹⁵³ Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 196-197.

Repetitions can be observed in anything, whether it is “lines of dialogue and bits of music to camera positions, characters’ behavior, and story action.”¹⁵⁴ The element of children in *jidaigeki* is normally not the focus of the Japanese period film. In the following, I will therefore emphasize the importance of children through the cinematic aspect of framing in four recent films in which children constitute an important part of the narrative: *The Twilight Samurai*, *The Hidden Blade*, *Scabbard Samurai* and *Abacus and Sword*. There is a tendency in these films to focus on different aspects of samurai family life, which is an interesting development. During the course of these films, the protagonists’ children assist their fathers in different ways (or, as is the case in *The Hidden Blade*, the little sister of the protagonist’s love interest), whether it is to do piecework to make ends meet, do household chores, keep household accounts, or encourage and motivate (and sometimes chastise) a downtrodden father with no hope.

In *The Twilight Samurai*, the framing is visible already at the beginning in the first scene, the funeral for Seibei’s wife: first, we see a wake of mourning people shot in the interior of a dark room which ends with a frame of Ito’s face (Seibei’s youngest daughter) and then there is the procession to the crematorium in bright, blinding snow. The film ends with a Japanese ritual of visiting the grave made by the elderly Ito to the grave of her father and Tomoe. The first and last scenes also serve to connect the transition from the Tokugawa period to the Meiji period as we listen to Ito’s voice-over. A second instance the framing technique is used, also includes Ito. Early in the film, we are introduced to Seibei as he leaves his working place for the day and goes home. Ito runs to meet him as he walks toward the house, he picks her up and walks to the gate. Later in the film, a shot of Seibei walking out of the house where he has killed Yogo, his wounds are bandaged, and he is on his way home as he stands at the gate (a natural frame). In the next shot, we see his family and his servant Naota outside the house, when Seibei comes through his own gate and says to his daughter: “Ito... I’m home” before he hands his sword to Naota, picks up Ito and moves to the door of his house. This is a repetition of the scenes, only reversed, and Ito serves the purpose of indicating Seibei’s love and kindness towards his children. Another example is when Seibei’s superior Kusaka Chōbei visits him late at night to bring him to chief councilor Hori. While waiting for Seibei, he sits down and sees five-year-old Ito as she peeks around the corner to look at him. He talks to her, asks her how old she is and says she is a sweetheart before he makes a funny face to

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 68.

make her laugh. After Seibei receives his order to kill Yogo, Kusaka even offers to look after Seibei's family if anything should happen to him, an offer Seibei is greatly relieved to hear.

Similarity and repetition are employed frequently in *The Twilight Samurai* to emphasize the importance of Seibei's two children. Thornton describes the element of variation as "germane to the traditional narrative,"¹⁵⁵ a statement that may be confirmed in a scene where Seibei and his daughters make wooden insect cages to make ends meet. This one scene is split up and spread throughout the course of the film, and the whole process is demonstrated. The narrative of the poor *rōnin* is common in earlier *jidaigeki* as well, but then usually represented by a scene of the *rōnin* pasting paper on the ribs of an umbrella. The variation of this traditional scene in *The Twilight Samurai* is further enhanced by the image of Seibei with his two daughters, a new addition to the classical narrative of the impoverished samurai.

The Hidden Blade also emphasizes scenes where characters are nice to children. Although To see how the abused bride Kie is doing, her younger sister Bun is sent by their father on foot alone from the farm to Munezō's house. To indicate the distance she has walked, we are introduced to her in an extreme long shot with mountains and a forest in the background with Bun appearing from behind a small hill, not unlike the way we are introduced to characters in a western movie. She stops by a small country roadside shrine to pray to Jizō, the protective deity of children and travelers. After she has arrived at Munezō's house and found her sister, we see Bun doing household chores such as washing clothes and scrubbing the floors. Munezō comes through the door and she drops down to a full kowtow, but Munezō is quick to raise her up, saying that it is not necessary to do *that*. In the next scene, Kie and Munezō laugh at the servant Naota's big yawn. Filmed with a low height camera, adjusted to the Japanese traditional way of sitting on the floor, Munezō turns to Kie's sister to point out that Kie is laughing again, a sign that she is getting better and this shot frames Bun between Kie and Munezō. The framing in this shot includes Bun as a natural part of the family and is a confirmation that she does not need to do a full kowtow in front of Munezō again. It also helps to further establish Munezō as a good, kind man.

In *Scabbard Samurai*, Tae, Nomi's daughter and played by Kumada Sea, was nine years old at the time of filming and like Nomi Takaaki (who plays protagonist Nomi Kanjurō), she was

¹⁵⁵ Thornton, *The Japanese Period Film: A Critical Analysis*, 183.

an amateur actor performing in her first feature-length film. Kumada plays a headstrong girl beyond her years and she has a powerful and direct on-screen presence. There are plenty of examples throughout the film with several shots of Tae where she is alone in the frame against a plain background, such as when she stands in a doorway outside the (providing a natural frame. Worthy of note is the way Tae is repeatedly framed at the center of the shot. When she is about to announce her father and his cannon stunt, she stands at the center of the frame between the two guards, with the guards and the cannon placed in the background as Tae runs to the foreground. In a medium long shot, Tae raises her arms and announces her father's performance, still at the center of the frame. It is interesting to observe how the strong position of the daughter adds a modern element to *Scabbard Samurai*, since *jidaigeki* is not about women, as Thornton has put it.¹⁵⁶

Abacus and Sword does not place as much focus on the child as the three previous films, at least not in the first half of it, but when Naokichi arrives into the narrative, the film puts most of its energy into dramatizing the strained relationship between father and son. An example is when Naoyuki wants to start teaching his son how to do bookkeeping, and the first frame in this shot shows the whole Inoyama family in one room, sitting in different parts of the room at the sides of the frame, as if in layers, but never obstructing our view. This stylized set-up and the camera's deep focus lead the eyes of the viewer right to Naokichi in the back, giving his great grandmother a massage. In this shot, Naokichi becomes the center of attention, and not merely because his father is talking about him and how it is time he learned accounting. The camera pans from the establishing shot showing the whole family, to the back where Naokichi stands. This creates a distinct sense of space and depth in the room and could be an understated homage to Ozu Yasujiro (1903-1963). Ozu was a Japanese director and screenwriter and is regarded as one of the most influential filmmakers of all time.¹⁵⁷ He portrayed themes like marriage and family, especially the relationships between the generations, as in his film *Tokyo Story* (*Tōkyō monogatari*, 1953). Although Ozu did not make *jidaigeki* films, but *gendaijeki*, it is interesting to see this small similarity. The frame of the family shot with a low angled camera (suited to the traditional Japanese way of sitting on the floor and creating a sense of depth by placing them in "layers"), which is found in Ozu's work and in *Abacus and Sword*, is also recognizable in *The Twilight Samurai* and *The Hidden*

¹⁵⁶ Thornton, *The Japanese Period Film: A Critical Analysis*, 24-26.

¹⁵⁷ David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 107.

Blade; when Seibei and his daughters are sitting in a dimly lit room making insect cages, and when Munezō, Kie, her little sister and the servant Naota are gathered for dinner, and Kie laughs for the first time since Munezō brought her home to nurse her.

4.3 Genre formulas and style conventions

In this part, I will compare the films' employment of different period film genre formulas and style conventions and emphasize the eventual generic and stylistic similarities and differences that have developed from the patterns and subgenres of *jidaigeki* delineated in chapter three. As in the part about narrative structure, I will concentrate on a few dominant characteristics frequently found in the films since the number of films selected requires a more collective and comparative approach instead of film-by-film analyses. How do the nine films employ and highlight the formulas and conventions from earlier *jidaigeki*? How do they differ from the established period film codes? To support my analysis, it is essential to illustrate with significant examples from the films.

4.3.1 Permeation of the postwar subgenres

In this section, I will explore the postwar subgenres of the Japanese period film again to see if they have made a safe transfer from the postwar period, and if potential developments can be found. Within the confines of nine recent *jidaigeki*, are these subgenres still relevant? Although the definition used is “subgenres” to define these tendencies, it does not mean that they are hard-and-fast categories, and they may overlap.

Of nostalgic samurai dramas, I have found three. *The Twilight Samurai*, *The Hidden Blade* and *Abacus and Sword*, where the two first are similar on many levels and present variations over the same narratives, themes, genre formulas and so on. Seibei and Munezō are trapped in the conflict of *giri* versus *ninjō* in a time normally considered to be the great division marker between traditional and modern times. However, whereas Seibei does question the rigid feudal system, as when he initially refuses the orders he are given to kill Yogo, Munezō is more bound by codes of respect and honor which he makes an effort to keep. Although he rescues his love Kie from abuse, he sends her away again for the sake of both their reputations when people begin to gossip that Kie is Munezō's mistress. As we witness their struggles to manage their own household without a woman to help them (Seibei also has children to take care of) and at the same time to stay sharp in their jobs also call for a feeling

of *mono no aware*. They have lost their high samurai ranks due to various reasons, and because of that, they also both confirm and rework the *rōnin* element usually present in the nostalgic samurai drama. The third nostalgic samurai drama is *Abacus and Sword*, which may be compared to Ozu, as I have already explained. The reason why *Abacus and Sword* is considered within this category and why it shares similarities with Ozu, is because of the film's "slice of life" portrayal of the Inoyama family, but a slice of the emotive, interior, and aestheticized life and the devotion to *mono no aware*. Moreover, the nostalgia is found in Naoyuki's work as an accountant, which makes him trapped in the way of *giri/ninjō*. He may be regarded as the film's "hero" who, despite taking the path of righteousness, does it out of a sense of obligation. This situation changes somewhat when he exposes the rice theft, but he remains bound by feelings of duty toward his clan, his job and his family.

Within the anti-feudal subgenre one can place *Scabbard Samurai* and *13 Assassins*. It is possible to interpret *Scabbard Samurai* as belonging to the anti-feudal drama because its comical depictions of the daily humiliating failures that Nomi endures in front of the *daimyō* may be seen as a critique of our contemporary society. *13 Assassins* includes obvious elements from both the anti-feudal and the *chanbara* subgenre, and due to such focuses as duels, epic battles and an increased and extended part for the antagonist, it clearly belongs in the *chanbara* category. The film's anti-feudal tendencies will be considered in the following. It has been written about Kudō's 1963 black-and-white version of the film that it describes "a corrupt world fostering unrewarding violence,"¹⁵⁸ which is precisely what is shown in the 2010 remake as well. Although films had been produced in color for a decade when Kudō made his *13 Assassins*, he shot the film in black-and-white, which can be considered a part of a new direction that Japanese film studios took in the 1960s (as described in chapter two) and the film used violence and realism to criticize the rules of feudal Japan. The protagonists of the so-called "cruel *jidaigeki*" subgenre are doomed to failure because of the degree to society's corruption.¹⁵⁹ The cruel-*jidaigeki* subgenre can be said to belong to the anti-feudal drama that also arose in the 1960s, as explained in chapter 3, and Miike's remake from 2010 is firmly within this cruel/anti-feudal subgenre of *jidaigeki*. An example from the film is the grotesque ways of lord Naritsugu, an authority figure who cares nothing for his people. His lust for blood is damaging the shogunate and it is threatening to shatter the country's fragile peace. He is an evil sociopath who rapes and kills at will, often in grotesque manners, and

¹⁵⁸ Robin Gatto, "Eiichi Kudo's Guerrilla Filmmaking", in *Midnight Eye*, May 14th, 2007, URL.

¹⁵⁹ Standish, *A New History of Japanese Cinema: A Century of Narrative Film*, 286-287.

always with a smile on his face. He chops off the arms, legs and tongue of a young farmer's wife and then uses her as a sex toy. We also see him use children as a target for his practices with bow and arrow.

The subgenre of Zen fighters is evident in *Samurai Fiction*, *Gohatto* and *Gojoe* (which I will come back to shortly). In *Samurai Fiction*, although Kazamatsuri is not the protagonist or the hero of the story, he owns the right to be the Zen fighter in the film because of his disdain for life and obsession with testing his skills. *Samurai Fiction* as a whole, however, is best suited in the subgenre of *chanbara*. As earlier described, classic *chanbara* films' in the prewar and wartime periods employed styles of camera work and editing, such as shot/reverse shot, cross-cutting, fast cutting in scenes of violent action, and other classical strategies,¹⁶⁰ and these techniques may be documented in *Samurai Fiction* in that it uses swift music video-style editing which adds to the fast pace of the film and the rhythm of its rock music soundtrack. Shot/reverse shot is a feature of the so-called classical Hollywood style of continuity editing, and this mixture of classical *chanbara* elements as well as a tinge of Hollywood style, are some of the aspects that make *Samurai Fiction* an updated, reworked genre film. I will later elaborate on recent *jidaigeki* and their more contemporary features. In *Gohatto*, the Zen fighter is Kanō. To test his nerve and courage, commander Kondō assigns Kanō with the duty of *kaishaku*; to behead¹⁶¹ another member of the Shinsengumi who has gone against the rules and taken loans in the name of the group. Just before the inscrutable, cold Kanō is about to behead the man, we hear the thoughts of Hijikata: "He's killed before." Later, another Shinsengumi member asks Kanō, "Why does a rich man's son join the Shinsengumi?" "To have the right to kill," Kanō replies.

Within the *chanbara* subgenre, except from *13 Assassins* and *Samurai Fiction* that I have already mentioned, one may also consider *Zatoichi*, with its clear climactic duel between Hattori and Zatoichi, or Zatoichi against a whole gang of *yakuza* fighters in the rain. Although Zatoichi is not a samurai hero (he is not even *rōnin*), Desser argues that the *chanbara* subgenre acknowledges different types of heroes that do not necessarily belong to the samurai caste.¹⁶² The film's powerful antagonist Hattori also helps to define it within

¹⁶⁰ Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, 357.

¹⁶¹ The Japanese term, *kaishaku*, refers to the duty of beheading one who has committed *seppuku*, Japanese ritual suicide of disembowelment, at the moment of agony. This is both to spare the condemned prolonged anguish until death and to spare the onlookers for the spectacle of the death throes that would follow the ritual.

¹⁶² Desser, "Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film," 157.

chanbara because of director Kitano's choice to focus more on him than on the Zatōichi character, which is a matter I will come back to when discussing *jidaigeki* with modern twists. *Gojoe* fits straight in as a *chanbara*, because of its sense of the fantastical and supernatural, and the swordfights include the dispatching of many hundred men. But *Gojoe*'s final duel is between two demonic characters that eventually disappear in lightning strikes, flames and explosives and is not so much a swordfight as it is a fight on the metaphysical level. There is also a clear connection with the Zen fighter title and warrior monk Benkei because of his liberation from worldly considerations and his only driving force is to test his skills in battle. He is obsessed with the vision he had to kill the demon of Gojō Bridge and is attracted to the evil force on account of the demons of his own past. Like Kazamatsuri, Benkei has stolen a precious sword; only he is more hesitant to use it than Kazamatsuri.

Gohatto is not so much concerned with duels as it is with what happens between the men psychologically and emotionally in several training and sparring sessions, and at last in the final duel. The film's distinctive use of color in the final duel accentuates the focus on emotion and desire and is a matter I will return to later. This does not mean that *chanbara* elements in *Gohatto* are not present. As with *Samurai Fiction*, *Gohatto* uses the *chanbara* subgenre to address more modern issues and concerns. In appearance and cinematographic features, *Gohatto* is more traditional. Director Ōshima explores the sexual tensions within the hierarchy and strict codes of the Shinsengumi and how the men's desires are both opposing, but also in support of, the declining feudal system that these samurai protect.

4.3.2 The “frontier of hopelessness” revisited

Our prior experience makes us expect certain things about a film. Because films are human creations, like other works of art, and because the filmmaker lives in history and society, he or she cannot avoid relating the film, in some way, to other works and to aspects of the world in general. Therefore we can find elements that are common in several different films. These common traits are usually called conventions and this is why, when we watch a *jidaigeki*, we have expectations for the film based on our prior experience of earlier *jidaigeki* we have seen, but not only that, we respond to the cues given to us in the film and use our prior experience of everyday life and of other films from other genres. We also call on our prior experience of earlier films by the same director, such as a film by Miike Takashi. His *13 Assassins* is a remake of Kudō's 1963 black-and-white film, not unlikely to be someone's prior experience

before watching Miike's 2010 version. Now being somewhat of a cult director, Miike became known in the West for his provoking extreme-violence movies like *Ichi the Killer* (*Koroshiya Ichi*, 2001) and *Audition* (*Ōdishon*, 1999). Blood, violence and sexual taboos are common topics in his movies, and these are also frequently employed in *13 Assassins*, the people who are familiar with his earlier works, generally know what to expect. The idea of the “frontier of hopelessness” as earlier described by Desser, and the similar “nobility of failure” from Morris, is one such genre expectation. However, there is no guarantee that the audience gets its expectations fulfilled, since film is capable of creating new conventions and some refuse to conform to the norms we expect, and eventually the new systems offered by these films may themselves produce conventions and thus create new expectations that we can learn to recognize and respond to. In the following, I will show how the idea of the “frontier of hopelessness” is utilized in some of the films.¹⁶³

The Twilight Samurai is definitely among the *jidaigeki* films that depict the “frontier of hopelessness”, as described by Desser earlier under the postwar developments of the genre in chapter three. It ends badly for the protagonist Seibei, and his fate is sealed from the very beginning. The reason we know this is not just because of the subtle hints and details in the narrative, but also because of style conventions and genre expectations that are repeated as motifs throughout the film. One example is found when Seibei first meets his friend Iinuma Michinojō. They are standing at the front of the frame, against a background of samurai practicing their rifle drill (and Seibei is not impressed). Michinojō makes two comments referring to the turmoil that Japan undergoes after Commodore Perry has arrived in Edo Bay.¹⁶⁴ The first comment is about all the filthy *rōnin* he has seen wandering the streets of Kyoto (the imperial capital) cursing and swearing in dialects impossible to understand. Second, when the rifles are fired, Michinojō is startled and he cynically comments on their clan's timing in securing their defenses against the Chōshū clan, who will overthrow the shogunate without hesitation when they join forces with the Satsuma clan. What Michinojō observes here is historically correct, and these comments also help to predict the outcome of the film. The theme of modern (meaning Western) technology and weaponry is referred to several times in the dialogue in the film, not only by Michinojō, but by Seibei himself as well

¹⁶³ Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 60-61.

¹⁶⁴ On behalf of the U.S. government, Commodore Perry forced Japan to enter into trade with the United States and demanded a treaty that would permit trade and the opening of Japanese ports to U.S. merchant ships. It was clear that Commodore Perry could impose his demands by force, and since Japan had no naval defenses, it had to agree to these demands.

as the man Seibei is unwillingly sent to kill, the rebellious Yogo Zenemon. As a result, the audience knows from the beginning what will eventually happen to Seibei. For his successor Munezō in *The Hidden Blade*, however, Yamada has a different fate in store. In the epilogue, Munezō has abandoned his samurai status, and after Kie has accepted his proposal of marriage, they set off together to the northern island of Ezo (present-day Hokkaidō) to start a new life.

The idea of the doomed hero and the “frontier of hopelessness” are evident throughout *Scabbard Samurai*, as the repetitions of Nomi’s daily failures serve as reminders of his imminent *seppuku*. To abandon one’s samurai status and become *rōnin* violates the laws of the land and there is soon a price on Nomi’s head. Already at the film’s beginning we sense trouble for him. He suffers his daughter’s relentless chastising and she begs him repeatedly to commit suicide rather than expose himself to more humiliation. She is right: Nomi has lost not only his sword, the symbol of his samurai status, but every sense of male self-respect and pride. The clan’s angry retainer announces Nomi’s failure when he shouts out the days left until *seppuku*. It seems impossible that this woebegone, old samurai, with no talent, will be able to save himself. Nomi is a doomed hero and the audience knows that he fights for a lost cause, and in this sense *Scabbard Samurai* can be argued to promote the idea of the “frontier of hopelessness.”

13 Assassins leads up to a grand battle, a final “frontier of hopelessness” for the doomed heroes. The tension builds up gradually and the film lets us know very early on that will happen. Hanbei, lord Naritsugu’s loyal guard and Akashi clan retainer, declares early in the film that he is the stronger and the most cunning compared to Shinzaemon. He also admits that Shinzaemon is the type to never give up, that when he is driven into a corner, he will not budge or overplay his hand. At this point in the movie, when describing the qualities of Shinzaemon, Hanbei is in fact foreshadowing the outcome of the big battle at the end. “He’s a man who beats you in the end. If Doi has picked him, then we’ve drawn the worst luck.” Shinzaemon warns his warriors of the risk involved; they will probably not survive the mission, but all are willing to sacrifice their lives for a good cause and for honor on the battlefield. They too, know what is in store for them, and although two of the assassins are left alive at the end of the film, the other eleven died for their cause. In *Gojoe* there is a sense of impending doom that is established from the start, as the film’s opening tells us that we are in the “Dark Ages.” The apocalypse is near, and the Gojō Bridge represents a “frontier of

hopelessness” on its own, with two demonic characters intent on killing each other from the outset.

4.3.3 The outsider

The outsider pattern can be found in all nine films, and a common point is that the outsider has killed, or will kill, someone. There are two exceptions to this, however. We do not know much about the past of Nomi Kanjurō in *Scabbard Samurai*, and in the duration of the film he does not kill anyone. Murder and killings is not the focus of *Abacus and Sword* either, as Inoyama Naoyuki and the other members of his family are devoted accountants, relatively wealthy and lead rather uneventful lives (although whether Naoyuki’s son Nariyuki kills anyone after leaving for Kyoto to serve in the government army remains unclear, but his position is in accounting so it is doubtful). How each film depicts the outcast is both similar and dissimilar. Most of them share the recurring genre formula of portraying *rōnin*, although some characters, such as Zatōichi, fall outside this pattern. The masseur and swordsman Zatōichi is an outsider, but he belongs to an even lower caste than the *rōnin*, namely the pariah. He is completely outside society, and therefore he has perhaps more in common with Benkei from *Gojoe*, who is now a Buddhist monk who has abandoned society. The *rōnin* Kazamatsuri in *Samurai Fiction* is a lone swordfighter, roaming the lands and living outside of society. However, Benkei had a choice. As a blind man, Zatōichi did not have the luxury of choosing his status. Kanō from *Gohatto* is hard to figure out, but seemingly he joined the Shinsengumi to be able to kill people in a legal way. There is no answer to this to be found in *Gohatto*, but *if* Kanō is a merciless killing machine, he shares this characteristic with the protagonist in the 1966 *jidaigeki* *Sword of Doom* (*Dai-bosatsu tōge*, directly translated “Great Bodhisattva Pass”), directed by Okamoto Kihachi; the *rōnin* protagonist Tsukue Ryūnosuke is a master swordsman of pure evil who lives to kill and has the same cold, unreadable look on his face. When Seibei meets his friend Michinojō for the first time in the film, their social ranks in relation to one another become clear. Michinojō, who is of a higher samurai rank than Seibei, wears his crown shaven, while Seibei’s hair on the crown has grown out, the mark of the outsider. His robes are also distinctly more shabby and worn-out and he becomes gradually more unkempt. At work, they make fun of him (in a friendly tone, but still) and give him the nickname “Twilight Seibei.”

In *Gohatto*, the fact that 18-year old Kanō Sōzaburō keeps his long hair pulled back in a ponytail, is mentioned three times in the film. The first time it is described as “a provocation for men sensitive to his charms” on title cards, the second time it is pointed out by commander Kondō when he has a talk about Kanō and his sexuality with Hijikata: “Why does he still have those locks? Isn’t he old enough to cut them?” The third time, after Hijikata has ordered Kanō to kill Tashiro, he asks Kanō directly: “Why do you keep those locks?” Kanō replies, “No reason,” and Hijikata orders him to cut them off, but Kanō objects, perfectly aware of the erotic power he has over his superior, saying “Let me keep them a while.” Hijikata asks why, and Kanō says he has made a vow. It is not revealed to whom this vow was made. In this way, the young Kanō, dressed innocently in white robes (with its virginal connotations), becomes the outsider. Not necessarily because of his possible sexual affinity, which the Shinsengumi force is already acquainted with, but because of his androgynous good looks.

Munezō in *The Hidden Blade* is originally from a higher-ranking samurai family, but his father was forced to commit *seppuku* because he was involved in the building of a bridge, a project that failed and of which there was a question of fraud. Since then, Munezō, his mother and sister Shino have led a humble life with a reduced stipend at a lower samurai caste. His younger sister marries Samon and the family maid Kie marries into a merchant family, and both women leave the house, while Munezō remains a bachelor. When he meets Kie again after three years, she inquires about his marital status (“Um... you’re married by now, aren’t you, sir?”), to which a perplexed and embarrassed Munezō answers “Uh, no... I’m afraid not” and covers it up with an excuse that after his mother died, the house is a mess. Shino’s husband Samon later brings up Munezō’s marital status once more when Shino is about to sew her brother’s ripped cloak. Samon makes a remark about it, saying that single men breed maggots, and comments on how Munezō looks more and more unkempt.

Zatōichi in *Zatoichi* is a blind masseur, and giving massages was a traditional occupation for the blind. Being of the lesser *hinin* (non-people), blind people and masseurs were among the very lowest of the low in social class, and were even outside the class system together with the *eta*, consisting of butchers, tanners and undertakers. That being said however, although Zatōichi is an outsider, he becomes the hero of the story since he is not only a masseur, but also an expert swordsman and a protector of the weak and poor. The Zatōichi character as portrayed by Katsu Shintarō in numerous films and a television series, has been blind since

he was a child, but the Zatōichi character as portrayed by Kitano Takeshi deceives us and the other characters in the film, as it is only at the end that he reveals that he is not blind. Zatōichi has wandered into town after killing the bodyguard Hattori in a duel. He confronts Torakichi, the tavern owner, known as ‘Pops’ and opens his eyes for the first time. A surprised Torakichi asks him if he is not blind after all, whereby Zatōichi replies, “Not at all”. Still surprised, Torakichi asks him why he acts blind, and Zatōichi says that it is because the blind sense people better. After having slayed Torakichi, Zatōichi moves to the tavern and blinds ‘Gramps’ as punishment for his crimes, since it was he who was Ginzo and Ogi’s superior all along, the mysterious, infamous “Kuchinawa” boss. The town now finally free of criminals, the festival can be enjoyed to its fullest. The film ends with a spectacular, celebratory dance number led by a noted Japanese tap dance troupe, “The Stripes”, and Zatōichi walking down a trail and tripping over a rock, saying, “Even with my eyes wide open, I can’t see a thing!”

In *Abacus and Sword*, the son of the wealthy merchant family Inoyama, Naoyuki, forces the household into a severe regime to be able to live a responsible, debt-free life. They become the outsiders; people in the neighborhood give them looks of disdain (although sinking deeper into debt themselves) and work colleagues mock Naoyuki and his father for eating simple food for lunch. When their son Naokichi is four years old, the family arranges a coming-of-age ceremony for him. Embarrassing his parents, Naoyuki places watercolor drawings of sea bream at each guest’s table setting because he cannot afford to buy real fish. The lacquering on their lunch boxes is made of bamboo peel and the stones on the Go board are of seashells.

Gojoe’s protagonist Benkei is an outsider because he is a Buddhist monk. His head is shaven to show that he has left society. Moreover, he is a former criminal, a murderer at that, but he is trying to make amends for his past by dedicating his new life to Buddhism. He encounters and befriends another outcast of society, the cynical grave robber Tetsukichi, who sees death as an opportunity to collect valuable items such as swords. In fact, the whole focus of the film is on rebel guerillas, hermits, thieves, and peasants, not on noble samurai. The background to the narrative of the film is the lower strata of society with the samurai mostly serving as victims for prince Shanao’s killing spree.

Nomi in *Scabbard Samurai* is on the run and has avoided every conflict by fleeing. He has lost his sword, the symbol of his samurai status, and now there is only the scabbard left. He is

wanted for deserting his clan. Toothless, wordless and bespectacled, the appearance of manly dignity and pride seems long gone and he looks perhaps even more shabby and unkempt than both Seibei and Munezō ever did. His daughter Tae grows more irritated by his shameful behavior. Nomi is doomed to be an outsider. Nevertheless, with his deep sense of duty and the fact that he silently accepts his own misery throughout his failures, Nomi starts building up sympathy and respect from the people around him.

The outsider character of *Samurai Fiction* is not the protagonist Heishirō, who is in fact the son of a clan officer. The outsider label belongs to the renegade swordsman and *rōnin* Kazamatsuri, who may be seen as a characterization of Miyamoto Musashi, the Zen fighter of the postwar *jidaigeki* subgenre. Like Musashi, Kazamatsuri is removed from *bushidō*. He is only interested in perfecting his skills as a swordsman. Right after the clan has discovered that Kazamatsuri has killed one of the clan lord's aides and stolen their precious sword, we see an extreme long shot of Kazamatsuri, striding confidently along the beach with rock music playing in the background. He might be the film's outcast, but he has attitude. Even though Desser proposes that the subgenre conventions of the Zen fighter implies that the only interest the Zen warrior has, is to test himself in swordfights, Kazamatsuri is slightly able to disprove this by showing a sense of righteousness. As he wanders around early on in the film, he arrives in the middle of a conflict between a gang of rogues and a young woman and an elderly man. The two seek revenge for the murder of the man's son, who was the woman's husband. The bandits have killed him and when Kazamatsuri arrives, they have started attacking the man and woman. The old man loses his sword on the ground, but Kazamatsuri picks it up and hands it over to him before killing the bandits one after the other. If he was only looking to test his skills with a sword, he need not have bothered with helping the old man get back his sword.

The characterization of the group of warriors in *13 Assassins* is, like in Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*, based on the different individuals who together constitute a motley crew. Each samurai has his own distinct personality and character traits: Shimada Shinzaemon is the war weary veteran who is left in charge of gathering the group of assassins. Shinzaemon's nephew Shinrokurō is a drunken gambler and womanizer, the elder *rōnin* Sahara can guarantee nothing but his skills with a spear and is the only one in the group who fights for the money rather than the mission to assassinate lord Naritsugu, Hirayama is an expert *rōnin* swordsman who has trained under Shinzaemon, and the comic relief Koyata is a lovestruck

hunter and bandit in need of a bath. All thirteen are well aware of the risk involved in the mission that lies ahead of them, but they are still willing to sacrifice themselves for the cause.

4.3.4 The *giri/ninjō* dichotomy reversed

The Twilight Samurai and *The Hidden Blade* by Yamada present an innovative view of the samurai, showing them as family men struggling with limited stipends and unrewarding jobs rather than as swashbuckling sword fighting heroes. Like their forbears, the samurai from the final years of the Tokugawa period continue to be torn between *giri* and *ninjō*, but for protagonists Seibei and Munezō, however, this binary opposition is reversed. Where social obligation was once the grounding virtue against which *ninjō* appeared as a weakness or vice, now *ninjō* is admirable, and social obligation is the cause of unhappiness. They also fall in love with an unacceptable partner, a classic example of *ninjō*. Even as the Japanese feudal system is disintegrated, Seibei remains bound by the code of honor of the samurai and by his social position. Although both Seibei and his love Tomoe are of samurai class, the film shows how they, too, are constrained by the class system, with Tomoe being of a wealthier family and a higher social rank. The opposite is true for Munezō, who is in love with Kie, a lowly farmer's daughter and a maid by occupation. Munezō eventually gives up his samurai rank to be able to marry her.

In *Gohatto*, personal feelings appear to destroy the close brotherhood of the Shinsengumi, and the divide between *giri* and *ninjō* is blurred. Human emotions and duty overlap and exist simultaneously as the Shinsengumi's duty to preserve and protect the Tokugawa shogunate is its most important role, but the men do not suppress or prevent their own personal desires in order to carry out this duty. The fine balance within the Shinsengumi group starts to collapse when we are introduced to Kanō. When he meets with his superiors, the camera zooms in on close-ups and extreme close-ups of Kanō's androgynous looks; his lips, pale skin, eyes and his long hair with forelocks symbolizing his adolescence, and the camera's focus on Kanō's face is repeated throughout the film. Thus, already from the beginning his presence creates an air of erotic tension which affects the whole group. Even his superiors Kondō and Hijikata are not immune to his youthful charms.

In *Scabbard Samurai*, Tae stresses her father about how important it is that he carries out his *giri*, his obligation, to the *daimyō* and to her as his daughter, to commit *seppuku*, because she

is embarrassed of him. She thinks he is a sorry excuse for a samurai, and that it is therefore his duty as a proper samurai to die honorably. Somehow Nomi manages to keep his pride after all when he refuses to do one last comical stunt for the *daimyō*'s depressed son by committing *seppuku* without a final speech or funny face. Nomi also denies to be beheaded at the moment of agony after *seppuku*, keeping a sense of honor to the last. In *Abacus and Sword*, Naoyuki implements a rigid sense of *giri* and *ninjō* by merging his familial duties with his work duties as bookkeeper, thus letting *giri* come above *ninjō* in all situations. One exception to this rule is perhaps when he goes against his superiors at the time he exposes the rice theft. At the same time he sees the political writing on the wall; the abacus will be the future weapon of the samurai, and their *giri* will no longer belong to the sword and to the clan lord.

4.4 *Mise-en-scène* and cinematography

In 1950, shortly after World War II, Kurosawa released *Rashomon*. He played with new visual techniques even without widescreen or color. Location work, long-lens panning shots, naturalistic lighting, framing that emphasizes pictorial values et cetera. On a narrative level, the intricate plot ideas in *Rashomon* are considerably affected by these techniques.¹⁶⁵ In this section, I will explore some of the technical aspects of the nine recent *jidaigeki*, how each film utilizes and emphasizes a cinematic technique to generate a certain effect or to make a point. I will start with the use of color.

4.4.1 *Mise-en-scène*: Color and costumes

A common element of all nine films is the focus they all place on aesthetics, photography and visual aspects, although to various effects and with various degrees of details and subtleties. *Gojoe* is the most visually extravagant film, where the Heike warriors wear colorful armor and the *mise-en-scène* is richly detailed with strong, bright colors. *Gohatto* uses color in a stylized, theatrical way to dramatic effect. *Samurai Fiction* may be filmed in black-and-white, but like *Gohatto*, a red color is inserted for dramatic effect. In *13 Assassins* the use of color is subtler, it blends more in with the rest of the *mise-en-scène* elements to form a whole; delicate color palettes, both in the interior and the exterior scenes, with for example shades of beige, brown, dark blue and grey and the set design is stylish, yet simple. The same is true for *The Twilight Samurai* and *The Hidden Blade* as well. In *Scabbard Samurai* and *Abacus and*

¹⁶⁵ Silver, *The Samurai Film*, 238.

Sword, the color palettes are brighter; there is a stronger, but still elegant, use of color in for example the women's costumes. Tae's colorful kimono stands in stark contrast to her father's rather worn out, brown robes and it helps her to stand out from the very beginning. She also wears a bright red sash around the waist of her kimono, accentuating her fresh spirit and also making her easily visible in the dark room they are kept in where the guards wear black clothes and her father brown. *Zatoichi* on the other hand uses a washed-out, sepia-tinged color palette with the eccentric Zatoichi character's platinum blond hair and a blood-red cane sword as a contrasting element.

When comparing the use of color in the films, I found some films that stood out from the others because of their explicit use of color. Color becomes an important technical device by which the audience may understand the film and has a specific function within the narrative. In *Gohatto*, the use of color sets the mood for the film and underlines the thematic aspects of both overt and covert passion between the characters. The color of their robes separates higher-ranking officials from the rest of the men, but it also distinguishes the young boy Kanō from the other militia members. In *Samurai Fiction*, although shot nearly entirely in black-and-white as an homage to older *jidaigeki*, and perhaps also invoking an illusion of verisimilitude, it also contains a few splashes of red for heightened dramatic effect. At the beginning and end of the film and whenever someone dies in battle the screen also flashes vividly red for a moment. The color title sequence after the prologue pans across cool blue steel swords and sword-wielding silhouettes are outlined behind red screens before flames fill the frame.

Gohatto opens with fleeting, secretive glances and soft, darkly saturated cinematography. This is true for the whole *mise-en-scène*. Costumes, the interior of the rooms and set design are shown in shades of black, brown and grey. The young recruit Kanō is the only one to wear white, which makes him look conspicuous, yet innocent. At nighttime, the color palette changes to a cool, controlled blue, and these two contrasting color palettes are used throughout the film, appropriate for the mood of tempered passions the characters are experiencing. While red is often used in film to indicate desire, passion and love, the desires in *Gohatto* are restrained, not burning red.

Nevertheless, the color red is used at later stages in *Gohatto*. First, when Kanō is brought to the Gion district in Kyoto (known for its teahouses and *geisha* entertainment) to be

“acquainted with women” as one Shinsengumi man describes it. The *geisha* sent to entertain Kanō, but whom he refuses to have intercourse with, has an elaborate costume with accentuated red sections and blood red lipstick. After Kanō is ordered to kill Tashiro, deputy commander Hijikata and Okita are waiting to observe the forced encounter from afar. It is nighttime, or at least twilight, with a deep blue color and fog all around, creating an artificial, dreamlike setting. This exterior sequence is clearly filmed on set, adding to the sense of drama, blurring the differences between objectivity and subjectivity, reality and imagination, outside and inside. Hijikata imagines several possible scenarios and he discusses with Okita who is in love with whom within the militia. Hijikata ponders how “a samurai can be undone by the love of men.” Okita tells him about a book he has just read about male devotion and Hijikata suspects him too for secretly being in love with Kanō. A defensive Okita denies it and is thus compelled to affirm his hatred for homosexuals: “I don’t understand these people. I hate them,” and tells Hijikata that he just loves beautiful stories. Then, the color red is used again, in Hijikata visions of Kanō meeting phantom lovers in first a white kimono, where Hijikata envisions himself with Kanō, and next, he has a vision of Kanō meeting Okita in a red kimono. This shows a more controlling and passionate Kanō, juxtaposed to his fading innocence due to the turn of events in the story. The color of the costumes in *Gohatto*, is also of significance. I have earlier mentioned Kanō’s white, virginal robes. The Shinsengumi men wear deep blue training uniforms, while the higher-ranking officers such as Hijikata and commander Kondō wear black, except for Okita. His uniform is of a paler shade of blue and with his feminine hairstyle (long and in a ponytail like Kanō, but without the forelocks) he stands out from the others, but not as much as Kanō.

Gojoe, on the other hand, has a very detailed *mise-en-scène* with deep, vivid and sumptuous colors. The film frequently uses deep focus and deep space to create an arrangement of *mise-en-scène* elements that almost takes on its own magical, spiritual meaning and underlining the metaphysical, supernatural elements and themes of the film. Man is a small, but essential part of the greater cosmic sphere, and the landscape shots help to emphasize this. At the same time, there is a vibrant energy in the colors. This energy is perhaps particularly apparent in the many action scenes, which are brutal and powerful; it is slaughter by numbers in the tradition of the *chanbara* film. Benkei’s monk robes are of a brown-beige color, blending in with the nature around him. Ajari, who is Benkei’s spiritual advisor and the one who saved him from his criminal ways, is dressed saintly in white. Red is used throughout the film to

accentuate the details of the *mise-en-scène*, such as red features in the Heike warriors' armor, the red clan banners, and the red collar on the Heike clan priest's robes.

5 Genre evolution

In the following, I will discuss the changing image of the samurai (“samurai who return home to their family”) as introduced by film scholar Iwamoto Kenji. I will also argue how the nine recent representative *jidaigeki* can be said to bend genre codes in new and sometimes unexpected ways and how some of them stay true to, and rework older conventions.

5.1.1 The changing image of the samurai

For film scholar Iwamoto, period films from the 2000s, such as *The Twilight Samurai* from 2002, call upon the viewers’ empathy with their stories about poor, underling samurai who take care of their families. In *The Twilight Samurai*, Sanada Hiroyuki plays Seibei, one of these poor, low-ranking samurai. As we know, Seibei is so modest and plain that people make fun of him and give him the nickname “Tasogare Seibei”, or “Twilight Seibei.” For Seibei, family matters more than success and to Iwamoto this samurai character stands in complete contrast to Mifune Toshirō’s character Tsubaki Sanjūrō in the 1962 period film of the same name by Kurosawa. There is only one similarity between the two samurai, according to Iwamoto, namely the skill of the blade.¹⁶⁶ What Iwamoto fails to mention, however, was that the samurai depicted by Kurosawa in his *jidai-geki* films started out as far from heroic. They were outsiders, *rōnin*, like the wild farmer and drunkard Kikuchiyo from *Seven Samurai* whose dream it is to become a samurai, or the dirty *rōnin* Sanjurō in *Sanjuro* (Tsubaki Sanjurō, 1962) with an unkempt appearance and indifferent attitude toward samurai etiquette. The samurai group as a whole in *Seven Samurai* fights heroically, yet their fight is against men much like themselves. They too are men of violence, just like the bandits, and the heroics they exhibit in the film are almost suicidal. The difference is that the seven *rōnin* have made themselves honorable through their actions; while the bandits remain one static mass of antagonism, the personalities, the attitudes and the goals that are implied in the seven samurai characters, evolve throughout the course of the film.

Another example given by Iwamoto is the protagonist from the 2003 period film *When the Last Sword is Drawn*. For the reason of sending remittance money to his family, the film’s protagonist becomes a member of the rough samurai law enforcement group Shinsengumi,

¹⁶⁶ Iwamoto Kenji, “Samurai imeeji no hensen: ‘Miyamoto Musashi’ kara ‘Tasogare Seibei’ made” [Changes in the samurai image: From ‘Miyamoto Musashi’ to ‘The Twilight Samurai’]. In *Jidaigeki densetsu: Chanbara eiga no kagayaki* [The jidai-geki tradition: The brilliance of *chanbara* films]. Volume 4, from the series: *Nihon eigashi sōsho*. Edited by Iwamoto Kenji (Tokyo: Shinwa sha, 2005), 284-285. (My translation from Japanese)

even if it means that he will never be able to see his family. Iwamoto believes that now there seems to be more sympathy for the more accessible and ordinary samurai, for the samurai who struggles to support his family, rather than for any heroic samurai character living a life and in a time far removed from the modern Japanese life. Another *jidaigeki* similar to *When the Last Sword is Drawn*, is *After the Rain* (*Ame agaru*, 1999) directed by Koizumi Takashi. *After the Rain* was made into a film from a posthumous script by Kurosawa, and Iwamoto claims that despite Kurosawa's depictions of heroic samurai, the protagonist in *After the Rain* is far from having success in life. He is described by Iwamoto as a "feminist samurai who is kind to his wife", and who rather enjoys being *rōnin*. Iwamoto further draws the comparison between the life of this samurai and the people in the period after Japan's so-called "bubble economy", who preferred the "Slow Life".¹⁶⁷

It seems to me that Iwamoto has failed to understand where recent *jidaigeki* offer something new. First of all, he sees the changes in the image of the samurai merely by highlighting a few example films within the *jidaigeki* genre that can be seen as variations of the same narrative and thematic elements. He does so in a similar fashion to Thornton, who only sees the evolution of the Japanese period film in light of historical and cultural aspects and exemplifies with two films from the same trilogy by the same director; two films that share the same narrative and thematic elements. To see the bigger picture, it is necessary to dig further into the genre of *jidaigeki*, because it is a rich and diversified genre, capable of reinventions and new additions to the already established narrative structures, genre formulas, style conventions and cinematography.

5.1.2 *Jidaigeki* with a fresh spin

Of the nine films chosen for analysis, I will argue that the following films represent the real revitalization of the genre: *Gojoe*, *Samurai Fiction*, *Zatoichi* and *Scabbard Samurai*. *Gojoe* is the only film of the nine that puts focus on the metaphysical, fantastical and supernatural. *Samurai Fiction* can be described as a rock-and-roll-samurai-comedy. *Zatoichi* repeats the narrative patterns of the original series, but also bends the characteristics in untraditional ways with his own distinct form and style. *Scabbard Samurai* contains deadpan humor and sparse dialogue, and not a single sword fight. I will argue that the remaining five films (13

¹⁶⁷ "Slow Life", also known in English as the "Slow Movement", encourages a cultural shift toward slowing down life's pace. The Slow Movement is not organized and controlled by a single organization. One of its fundamental characteristics is that it is volunteered by individuals who make up the community of Slow; Iwamoto, "Samurai imeeji no hensen: 'Miyamoto Musashi' kara 'Tasogare Seibei' made," 284-285.

Assassins, *Gohatto*, *Abacus and Sword*, *The Twilight Samurai* and *The Hidden Blade*) are reworking the traditional aspects rather than revolutionizing the genre, but they still offer valuable insight into newer thematics in *jidai-geki*, which, as far as I am concerned, have previously not been dealt with in the genre (the exception being *13 Assassins*). Themes such as homosexuality (*Gohatto*), portrayal of a family of bookkeepers and their mundane daily life (*Abacus and Sword*), a low-ranking family-oriented samurai who struggles to maintain his honor without resorting to violence (*The Twilight Samurai*) and a samurai who is torn between loyalty to the waning samurai class and his love for a lowly farm girl (*The Hidden Blade*) are all important elements to keep the Japanese period film viable for the 21st century.

For *Gojoe*'s producer Sentō Takenori, who has worked with many young, contemporary directors in Japan today, and his production company Suncent Cinema Works, the film represented an opportunity to make a *jidaigeki* film more suited to a younger audience. He helped produce the “Ring” horror series, which became “a hit at the box office by applying a teen-friendly gloss to genre conventions,” and so he wanted to do the same for *jidaigeki*.¹⁶⁸ His intention was not to create a classical *jidaigeki*, but a Japanese action movie. A willing partner for Sentō's plan was found in Japan's punk filmmaker Ishii Sōgo, who had been considering a *jidai-geki* project for over ten years, based on the life of Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159-89). Yoshitsune was a prince of the Genji clan (also known as the Minamoto clan). As a baby he was spared when the rival Heike (also known as the Taira clan) wiped out his family clan, and he grew up to lead the remaining Genji forces to clever triumphs over the Heike clan, immortalized in story and song. The legendary warrior monk Musashibō Benkei was known for his strength and would challenge anyone crossing Kyoto's Gojō Bridge to combat, and then strip his defeated opponents of their weapons. He had already gathered 999 swords when the young Yoshitsune defeated him in a duel, and from that day on Benkei changed his ways and became Yoshitsune's faithful right-hand man. However, Ishii did not want a mere retelling of the events in the life of Yoshitsune, his focus would be instead on the legendary meeting between Yoshitsune and Benkei on Gojō Bridge. In *Gojoe*, historical facts are twisted and turned and given a new, fantastical lining. Ishii used the story as a backdrop and put elements of science fiction and magic realism into it.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Mark Schilling, “‘Gojo Reisenki’: Shock treatment for jidaigeki,” a review of *Gojoe*, directed by Ishii Sōgo. *The Japan Times*, Oct. 17, 2000, URL.

¹⁶⁹ Schilling, “‘Gojo Reisenki’: Shock treatment for jidaigeki,” URL; Tom Mes and Jasper Sharp, *The Midnight Eye guide to new Japanese film* (Berkeley, California: Stone Bridge Press, 2005), 73.

Since the story of *Gojoe* is based on one of Japan's most popular feudal legends, it is perhaps not so much a *jidaigeki* costume drama as it is a typical Ishii film "in period garb."¹⁷⁰ Ishii blends elements and themes from his films from the 90's such as the spiritual, the metaphysical and the fantastical, and combines them with the energy of his films from the 80's. The legend is very famous in Japan, but according to Ishii there are not many young people who know it. Usually, the audiences of his films are young people but since this was the first time he could shoot a film on a big budget, he wanted more people to see it. It was meant as a commercial blockbuster, but the results at the box office were disastrous for *Gojoe* and its producer Sentō. The film ruined Sentō's production company Suncent Cinema Works, and it could no longer produce its characteristic arthouse films. The failure became even greater as Sentō did not succeed in selling *Gojoe* to foreign distributors, which made the domestic DVD market the only arena to regain some of the cost.¹⁷¹

Samurai Fiction separates itself from the films it was inspired by, such as the works of Kurosawa, with its music video-style editing and rock music soundtrack, courtesy of actor Hotei Tomoyasu who plays Kazamatsuri. Although it pays homage to earlier *jidaigeki*, it does so in a comical way with many inside jokes and allusions. The story is more or less a classical cliché of samurai honor but at its core, *Samurai Fiction* explores the *jidaigeki* genre with a postmodern twist of self-referential remodeling of it. *Samurai Fiction* attacks traditional narrative and style through what Alain Silver calls a "scattergun approach" with "many powerful images".¹⁷² For instance, the film starts with a black-and-white pre-title sequence where a young samurai dashes into a bamboo grove.

At the very beginning of *Samurai Fiction*, in the first shot there is a panning long lens on a running figure, a brief tribute to Kurosawa, taken from *Seven Samurai*. After the samurai have first arrived in the village, there is an alarm and they run to find its source. What Kurosawa did was to cut together six shots of different running samurai dynamically matched by various techniques such as composition, lighting, setting, figure movement, and panning camera movement.¹⁷³ Back to *Samurai Fiction*, in the next shot of the young samurai Heishirō, he draws his wooden training sword and attacks the thick bamboo, shouting exaggeratedly with every slash and thrust. He is brought to the foreground by a jump cut, and

¹⁷⁰ Mes and Sharp, *The Midnight Eye guide to new Japanese film*, 73.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Silver, *The Samurai Film*, 247.

¹⁷³ Silver, *The Samurai Film*, 247; Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 226.

a side move predicts his rush out of the frame before a slight low angle camera shows us the last series of jabs and shouts. He then sheaths his sword, goes to his knees and a voice-over says, “This is me, three hundred years ago. My name was Inukai Heishirō. It’s a good name.” The end of this introductory sequence ends with a point-of-view shot up into the trees. There is a sense of *mono no aware* here, with the samurai becoming one with his sword, a rhythmic, dynamic and uncharacteristically staged sequence which sets the mood for the film. Until its end, *Samurai Fiction* combines non-traditional elements such as the rock music soundtrack and the black-and-white images that turn red whenever someone dies in battle. It merges parody and comedy with feudal scenery, Japanese *chanbara* and *jidaigeki* style and with a hint of Hollywood. Similarities can be drawn to for example Quentin Tarantino’s films from the early 90s such as *Reservoir Dogs* (1991) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), where Tarantino revived the crime genre with self-referential irony. This type of post-modern revival of old genres became characteristic of mainstream American cinema in the 1990s.¹⁷⁴

In addition to paying homage to the old *Zatōichi*-films and television series with Katsu Shintarō playing the role of the blind masseur and swordmaster *Zatōichi*, Kitano’s *Zatoichi* bends the traditional aspects of the original series in surprising ways. One such twist is seen in *Zatōichi*’s necessary antagonist, the *ronin* Hattori (played by Tadanobu Asano). Tadanobu’s Hattori is not your typical *jidaigeki* antagonist; a quiet and brooding character, he is quite an ambiguous adversary. Kitano himself admits in an interview done with Time Magazine that he put a lot of energy into Asano’s scenes, giving him “all the cool ways of withdrawing his sword.” Kitano thus manages to shift the focus further away from the title character, giving the younger indie icon Asano much of the focus in the film.¹⁷⁵ In order to create a dynamic film, Kitano also uses unfamiliar techniques like short shots and dolly shots (moving cameras). In a making-of documentary of *Zatoichi*, Kitano admits that for a film to be entertaining the camera has to move and the shots must be short. Since the norms for big-screen entertainment films today demand such techniques, Kitano acknowledges to having bowed to them during the making of *Zatoichi* by using technical devices such as cranes and dollies and thus making many short cuts. Kitano says, “I made the film in the spirit of big-screen entertainment.”¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴ Tom Mes, “Samurai Fiction,” in *Midnight Eye*, April 24, 2001. URL.

¹⁷⁵ Bryan Walsh, “Striking A New Beat”, in *Time Magazine*, Monday, September 8th, 2003. URL.

¹⁷⁶ Making-of documentary, Special Features of the film *Zatoichi* (2003), written, directed and edited by Kitano Takeshi. Released by Artificial Eye.

In *Scabbard Samurai*, Nomi Kanjurō is an old, goofy, toothless and world-weary *rōnin* with glasses. The man who portrays this weebegone character, Nomi Takaaki, was an amateur actor when he got the part. Director and comedian Matsumoto Hitoshi discovered Nomi some years before the film was made, and put him in one of his TV comedy shows. In *Scabbard Samurai*, Nomi dances with a face painted on his belly, shoots himself out of a cannon, plays a flute with his nose, lifts a pile of rocks with his nostrils, and the list goes on and on. He does all of this with a comical air of stoic determination and throughout the film he remains mostly wordless with a deadpan expression, not unlike the American comic actor Buster Keaton (1895-1966), best known for his silent films. The film's minimalistic plot is supported by sparse dialogue and the same aesthetic that the film carries in its cinematography, editing, and art direction; Long, wide shots with minimum cuts create a feeling of tension, but also pensive moments to take in the beautiful scenery and colors.

5.1.3 A growing interest in *jidaigeki*

The status of the Japanese period film is rising. There is an increasing audience popularity and rising box office of *jidaigeki* films in Japan. In 2009, the box office for *jidaigeki* films reached close to JPY 120 billion, up from under JPY 100 billion in 2007. Ten *jidaigeki* films were released in 2010, compared with eight in 2009 and five in 2008. So, what is the reason behind this growing interest in *jidaigeki*? There is not one, but several, possible reasons for this. One is the studios' clever casting of already popular young actors to play roles of samurai and other historical or fictional characters. This has caused more young viewers, particularly young women, to go to the movie theaters. There are also the changes in plot and narrative to consider.¹⁷⁷ Let me illustrate with an example: In the *Kinema Junpō* list for 2000, the character-driven *Gohatto* ranked #3 out of 30 films, while the violence-based *Gojoe* ranked as #24 on the same list. At the box office, none of them did particularly well. My line at box office gross is drawn JPY 15 billion and in 1999, *Gohatto* was ranked last of all the *jidaigeki* on the list with an income of JPY 10,1 billion. If *Gohatto* had not been ranked #3 on the film critics' list, it would not have been considered for analysis in this thesis, since its box office income was too small.

However, another film example gives a different result: Miike's *13 Assassins* did well at the box office in Japan, JPY 16 billion, and on Box Office Mojo's list the film ranked #32 out of

¹⁷⁷ Stephen Harner, "More Japanese Enjoying Jidai Geki Movies," in *Forbes*, December 25, 2010. URL.

182 films, and also ranked #3 out of 29 films on *Kinema Junpō*'s top ten list for 2010. This genre typical violent *chanbara* ranked 8 films above the daily-life oriented *Abacus and Sword* on the critics' top ten list the same year. *13 Assassins* seems to be an exception from the rule, as one is able to observe on a more general basis a pattern of changes in narrative, thematics and genre/style conventions in the *jidaigeki* genre. The trend moves away from the more traditional renderings of excessive violence with themes of the righteous, simple samurai fighting villains, to more character-driven narratives, including love stories, stories concentrated around the concept of family and children, and similar stories of conflicts in daily life within the social constraints in the Tokugawa period.

6 Conclusion

How has the Japanese period film genre, the *jidaigeki*, evolved in the last fifteen years? In what ways have *jidaigeki* films changed and developed through the decades in terms of narrative structures, genre formulas and style conventions? In which sense are these contemporary films different and/or similar from older *jidaigeki* from the prewar and postwar periods, and how can the new ones be said to have changed genre codes? To answer these questions, I collected data of the *jidaigeki* films that were ranked in Japanese box office lists from 1997 to 2012, limited the box office gross income per movie to JPY 15 billion, and compared the titles with the “Top ten Japanese movies of the year” lists from the same period in the Japanese film magazine *Kinema Junpō*. I thus came up with a selection of nine contemporary representative Japanese period films. This methodology ensured that the films chosen for analysis were not a random selection, but have either been of critical interest in Japan or have had a certain success in the movie theaters.

In the thesis, I have shown how the Japanese period film has gone through many changes in the course of its history. Chapter two provided a historical framework, first distinguishing the two mega-genres of *jidaigeki* and *gendai geki*, before moving on the humble beginnings of *jidaigeki* in classical Japanese theater forms such as *kabuki* and oral Japanese storytelling. In the 1920s and 1930s there was strict film supervision, but early filmmakers such as the pioneer Makino Shōzō broke with genre conventions. During World War II and the following American Occupation years the Japanese period film suffered under censorship and suppression. The coming of the television with the resulting audience decline in movie theaters in the 1960s and 1970s did not help *jidaigeki* to recover. The decades from the 1980s up until the present day have seen the arrival of the multiplex that led to increased movie theater attendance, but a decreased domestic market share, implying the domination of Hollywood movies. In recent years, however, there has been an increase in the domestic market share and a growing interest for *jidaigeki* due to the casting of young, popular actors in the roles of samurai and other historical or fictional characters. Chapter three covered the developments in prewar narrative patterns, genre iconography and postwar subgenres, and the pattern of continuity manifested itself in ideas such as the doomed hero (“frontier of hopelessness”), the *giri/ninjō* dichotomy and the four postwar subgenres of *jidaigeki*: the nostalgic, the anti-feudal, the zen fighters and the *chanbara*. Chapter four analyzed the nine

recent representative *jidai-geki* in terms of the prewar and postwar structures of narrative and subgenres, as well as comparing the films' employment of different period film genre formulas and style conventions. *Mise-en-scène* was utilized in the analysis of color and costumes, and with the cinematographic technique of framing I emphasized the importance of children in four of the films. Chapter five was a brief discussion on genre evolution and the possible changing image of the samurai as well as some recent uplifting statistics.

The *jidaigeki* genre used to be one of the strongholds of Japanese domestic film production. To reform and develop it for younger audiences may be both the challenge, and the key, to revive the genre and its traditions in Japanese cinema. As Darrell William Davis suggests, "There must be innovation in recycling or renovating the genre standards, because a cinema of nostalgia or neoclassicism can easily backfire."¹⁷⁸ To make the Japanese period film, and Japanese cinema in a more general context, more applicable and current for younger viewers, it is perhaps time to look to alternatives that have not been accessible, or even technologically possible, until recent years. Modern technological advances have made it possible for people to see films virtually everywhere, from the classical comic books and computer games, to different technological, and often mobile, platforms such as various game consoles, Internet, and mobile phones. In the last years, however, the nostalgic *jidaigeki* has had decent success in box office incomes and in film critics' top ten lists. Yamada's *The Twilight Samurai* and *The Hidden Blade*, Morita's *Abacus and Sword*, Miike's *13 Assassins*, Ōshima's *Gohatto*, Matsumoto's *Scabbard Samurai*, Kitano's *Zatoichi* and Nakano's *Samurai Fiction* have all qualities that prove how they belong to, and may still challenge a viable genre.

The *jidaigeki* is not a genre in which all the characteristics, conventions and formulas of its past are carved in stone, but rather a dynamic genre capable of reworking older themes and narrative structures. It blends newer film techniques with traditional narratives and newer narrative structures with older film techniques, both from Japanese period film masters such as Kurosawa, but also from recent American directors such as Tarantino. It is also a genre capable of creating new conventions that are yet to be defined as classics. This thesis has argued that there is indeed a relationship between past and present in the Japanese period film. The results of the analysis indicate that the Japanese period film is still true to tradition and history, and that the genre recently has been benefiting from what could perhaps be

¹⁷⁸ Darrell William Davis, "Japan: Cause for (Cautious) Optimism", in *Contemporary Asian Cinema: Popular Cinema in a Global Frame*, edited by Anne Tereska Ciecko (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), 197.

termed a genre renaissance, or revitalization. The key is in the details. The films utilize different cinematic techniques of editing, sound, framing and color, and include into the narratives elements such as homage and parody, family life and children, ideas of the metaphysical and supernatural, homosexuality, problems regarding caste, love affairs and much more. By this salient mixing of different cinematic elements of narrative-, style-, and genre-related characteristics, the nine contemporary *jidaigeki* films show a likeness to, and divergence from, its origins.

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Appendices

The following is the ranking lists I have used as research for the thesis. The Internet sites where I extracted ranking information from, have different systems of ranking the films. Therefore, the lists I have made are differently organized too, following the system from each Internet site. I have tried my best to include information about box office receipts/gross, although I realize the confusion that may arise around the use of different currencies to list the box office receipts. One site used Japanese Yen, the other used US Dollars and I am not sure when the numbers from each site were gathered, so there may be slight differences in exchange rates.

The listings marked in **bold** are the movies that I have chosen for my thesis analysis. Some of the movies in the following lists may or may not be considered to be within the *jidaigeki* genre. *Jidaigeki* is a contested term even today, so I may have included films from online ranking sites that are not considered to be *jidaigeki* by certain scholars, while other scholars may consider the same films to be *jidaigeki*. Animation (*anime*) films, children's movies and TV-series that can be considered to be *jidaigeki* have not been considered in my thesis.

Eiga-ranking's list of domestic Japanese box-office movies of all time

<http://www.eiga-ranking.com/boxoffice/japan/alltime/domestic/>

Rank (#1-337)	Box-office receipts/gross (billions of yen)	Title	Year of release in Japan	Director
44	41,1 億円	武士の一分 (Bushi no Ichibun) (Love and Honor)	2006	Yamada Yōji
68	34,5	どろろ (Dororo)	2007	Shiota Akihiko
101	30,1	陰陽師 (Onmyoji)	2001	Takita Yōjirō
115	27,0	北の零年 (Kita no Zeronen) (Year One in the North)	2005	Yukisada Isao
141	23,2	大奥 (Ōoku) (The Lady Shogun and Her Men)	2010	Kaneko Fuminori
150	22,1	梟の城 (Fukurō no Shiro) (Owl's Castle)	1999	Shinoda Masahiro
154	22,0	大奥 (Ōoku) (Oh-Oku: The Women of the Inner Palace. Also known as: O-oku: The Movie)	2006	Hayashi Toru
168	20,8	千年の恋 ひかる源氏物語 (Sennen no koi: Hikaru Genji Monogatari) (Sennen no Koi: Story of Genji. Also known as: Genji: A Thousand-Year Love)	2001	Horikawa Tonkō

232	17,1	戦国自衛隊1549 (Sengoku Jieitai 1549) (Samurai Commando: Mission 1549)	2005	Tezuka Masaaki
244	16,0	陰陽師2 (Onmyoji 2)	2003	Takita Yōjirō
245	16,0	十三人の刺客 (Jūsan-nin no Shikaku) (13 Assassins)	2010	Miike Takashi
256	15,0	武士の家計簿 (Bushi no Kakeibo) (Abacus and Sword)	2010	Morita Yoshimitsu
262	14,3	Goemon (Also known as: The Legend of Goemon)	2009	Kiriya Kazuaki
263	14,1	Shinobi: Heart Under Blade	2005	Shimoyama Ten
264	14,0	蝉しぐれ (Semishigure) (The Samurai I Loved)	2005	Kurotsuchi Mitsuo
267	14,0	どら平太 (Dora-Heita)	2000	Ichikawa Kon
302	12,0	たそがれ清兵衛 (Tasogare Seibei) (The Twilight Samurai)	2002	Yamada Yōji
312	11,5	椿三十郎 (Tsubaki Sanjūrō)	2007	Morita Yoshimitsu
314	11,2	カムイ外伝 (Kamui Gaiden) (Kamui)	2009	Sai Yōichi
334	10,1	御法度 (Gohatto) (Taboo)	1999	Ōshima Nagisa
-	-	-	-	-
337	-	-	-	-

Box Office Mojo: Japan Yearly Box Office 2002-2012

<http://boxofficemojo.com/intl/japan/yearly/>

<u>2012</u>	Movie Title	Director	Distributor	Gross (US \$)
Rank (#1-181)				
16	Rurōni Kenshin: Meiji Kenkaku roman tan (Ruroni Kenshin)	Ōtomo Keishi	WB	36,798,585
18	Nobō no Shiro (The Floating Castle)	Higuchi Shinji and Inudō Isshin	Toho	31,967,471
77	Ōoku – Eien (The Castle of Crossed Destinies)	Kaneko Fuminori	Shochiku	6,715,094

<u>2011</u>	Movie Title	Director	Distributor	Gross (US \$)
Rank (#1-181)				
39	Genji Monogatari: Sennen no Nazo (Tale of Genji: A Thousand Year Enigma)	Tsuruhashi Yasuo	Toho	17,295,465
78	Saya-zamurai (Scabbard Samurai)	Matsumoto Hitoshi	Shochiku	6,752,925
85	Ogawa no Hotori	Shinohara Tetsuo	Toho	6,136,255
92	Ichimei (Hara-kiri: Death of a Samurai)	Miike Takashi	Shochiku	5,237,269
140	Onigamiden (Legend of the Millennium Dragon)	Kawasaki Hirotugu	Sony	1,000,626

<u>2010</u>	Movie Title	Director	Distributor	Gross (US \$)
Rank (#1-182)				
19	Ōoku (The Lady Shogun and Her Men)	Kaneko Fuminori	Shochiku	27,710,666
34	Jūsan-nin no Shikaku (13 Assassins)	Miike Takashi	Toho	16,752,363
36	Bushi no kakeibo (Abacus and Sword)	Morita Yoshimitsu	Asmik Ace Entertainment, Shochiku	16,575,961

57	Saigo no Chūshingura (The Last Chushingura/The Last Ronin)	Sugita Shigemichi	Warner Bros	9,065,176
68	Sakuradamon-gai no hen	Sato Junya	Toei	7,394,930
83	Raiou (The Lightning Tree)	Hiroki Ryuichi	Toho	5,486,106
89	Hisshiken torisashi (Sword of Desperation)	Hirayama Hideyuki	Toei	4,850,615
109	Zatoichi: The Last	Sakamoto Junji	Toho	3,680,822
142	Hano no Ato (After the Flowers)	Nakanishi Kenji	Toei	1,215,412

<u>2009</u>	Movie Title	Director	Distributor	Gross (US \$)
Rank (#1-197)				
41	Goemon	Kiriya Kazuaki	Shochiku	14,374,689
45	Kamui Gaiden (Kamui)	Sai Yōichi	Shochiku	11,879,118
59	Katen no Shiro (Castle Under Fiery Skies)	Tanaka Mitsutoshi	Toei	8,839,902
95	Tajomaru	Nakano Hiroyuki	Warner Bros	4,756,610
114	Zen	Takahashi Banmei	Herald	2,877,113

<u>2008</u>	Movie Title	Director	Distributor	Gross (US \$)
Rank (#1-240)				
61	Kakushi toride no san akunin – The Last Princess (The Last Princess/Hidden Forest: The Last Princess)	Higuchi Shinji	Toho	8,498,246
87	Ichi	Sori Fumihiko	Warner Bros	4,382,279
121	Jirochō sangokushi (Samurai Gangsters)	Tsugawa Masahiko	Herald	2,292,432

<u>2007</u>	Movie Title	Director	Distributor	Gross (US \$)
Rank (#1-210)				
17	Dororo	Shiota Akihiko	Toho	27,082,688

43	Tsubaki Sanjūrō	Morita Yoshimitsu	Toho	9,712,753
67	Tsukigami (The Haunted Samurai)	Furuhata Yasuo	Toei	6,285,714
68	Sakuran	Ninagawa Mika	Asmik Ace	5,973,534
90	Kaidan	Nakata Hideo	Shochiku	3,560,173
95	Chacha: Tengai no Onna (Chacha)	Hashimoto Hajime	Toei	3,372,123
107	Yajikita dōchū Teresuko (Three for the Road)	Hirayama Hideyuki	Shochiku	2,503,707
116	Taitei no Ken (The Sword of Alexander)	Tsutsumi Yukihiro	Toei	1,723,861

<u>2006</u>	Movie Title	Director	Distributor	Gross (US \$)
Rank (#1-163)				
11	Bushi no Ichibun (Love and Honor)	Yamada Yōji	Shochiku	33,523,449
24	Ōoku (Oh-oku: The Women of the Inner Palace) (also known as: O-oku: The Movie)	Hayashi Toru	Toei	15,688,239
138	Hana yori mo naho (Hana: The Tale of a Reluctant Samurai)	Koreeda Hirokazu	Shochiku	458,706

<u>2005</u>	Movie Title	Director	Distributor	Gross (US \$)
Rank (#1-150)				
18	Kita no zeronen (Year One in the North)	Yukisada Isao	Toei	21,360,942
31	Sengoku Jieitai 1549 ('Samurai Commando: Mission 1549')	Tezuka Masaaki	Toho	14,616,085
39	Shinobi (Shinobi: Heart Under Blade)	Shimoyama Ten	Shochiku	11,680,922
50	Semishigure (The Samurai I Loved)	Kurotsuchi Mitsuo	Toho	9,910,280
84	Mayonaka no Yaji-san Kita-san (Yaji and Kita: The Midnight Pilgrims)	Kudō Kankurō	Asmik Ace	3,225,727
89	Azumi 2: Death or Love	Kaneko Shusuke	Toho	2,888,549

<u>2004</u>	Movie Title	Director	Distributor	Gross (US \$)
Rank (#1-126)				
49	Kakushi ken oni no tsume (The Hidden Blade)	Yamada Yōji	Shochiku	8,004,304

<u>2003</u>	Movie Title	Director	Distributor	Gross (US \$)
Rank (#1-121)				
2	The Last Samurai	Edward Zwick	Warner Bros	119,268,595
15	Zatōichi (Zatoichi: The Blind Swordsman/The Blind Swordsman: Zatoichi)	Kitano Takeshi	Shochiku and Office Kitano	23,696,316
29	Onmyoji 2	Takita Yōjirō	Toho	13,022,862
46	Azumi	Kitamura Ryūhei	Toho	6,668,719
59	Makai tenshō (Samurai Resurrection)	Hirayama Hideyuki	Toei	4,494,239
77	Mibu gishi den (When the Last Sword is Drawn)	Takita Yōjirō	Shochiku	2,487,338

<u>2002</u>	Movie Title	Director	Distributor	Gross (US \$)
Rank (#1-111)				
45	Tasogare Seibei (The Twilight Samurai)	Yamada Yōji	Shochiku	6,745,440
84	Umi wa Miteita (The Sea Is Watching)	Kumai Kei	Nikkatsu?	1,493,114

Kinema Junpo's Top 10 Japanese Movies (by year)

<http://www.rinkworks.com/checklist/list.cgi?u=crimson&U=crimson&p=kinemajunpotop10s>

From 1997-2011.

No *jidaigeki* in the list for 1997.

<u>1998</u>	Original Movie Title (English title)	Director
Rank (#1-30)		
15	SF: Episode One (Samurai Fiction)	Nakano Hiroyuki

<u>1999</u>	Original Movie Title (English title)	Director
Rank (#1-29)		
12	Omocha (The Geisha House)	Fukasaku Kinji
29	Fukuro no shiro (Owls' Castle)	Shinoda Masahiro

<u>2000</u>	Original Movie Title (English Title)	Director
Rank (#1-30)		
3	Gohatto (Taboo)	Ōshima Nagisa
9	Ame Agarū (After the Rain)	Koizumi Takashi
11	Dora-heita (Also known as: Alley Cat)	Ichikawa Kon
24	Gojo reisenki: Gojoe (Gojoe: Spirit War Chronicle)	Ishii Sogo

No *jidaigeki* in the list for 2001.

<u>2002</u>	Original Movie Title (English Title)	Director
Rank (#1-28)		
1	Tasogare Seibei (The Twilight Samurai)	Yamada Yōji
13	Sukedachi-ya Sukeroku (Vengeance for Sale)	Okamoto Kihachi
17	Umi wa Miteita (The Sea Is Watching)	Kumai Kei
28	Ryōma no tsuma to sono otto to aijin (Ryoma's Wife, Her Husband and Her Lover)	Ichikawa Jun

<u>2003</u>	Original Movie Title (English Title)	Director
Rank (#1-30)		
7	Zatōichi (The Blind Swordsman: Zatoichi)	Kitano Takeshi
24	Mibu Gishi Den (When the Last Sword is Drawn)	Takita Yōjirō

<u>2004</u>	Original Movie Title (English Title)	Director
Rank (#1-30)		
5	Kakushi ken oni no tsume (The Hidden Blade)	Yamada Yōji

<u>2005</u>	Original Movie Title (English Title)	Director
Rank (#1-30)		
13	Semishigure (The Samurai I Loved)	Kurotsuchi Mitsuo
24	Kita no Zeronen (Year One in the North)	Yukisada Isao

<u>2006</u>	Original Movie Title (English Title)	Director
Rank (#1-30)		
5	Bushi no Ichibun (Love and Honor)	Yamada Yōji
23	Hana yori mo naho (Hana: The Tale of a Reluctant Samurai)	Koreeda Hirokazu

<u>2007</u>	Original Movie Title (English Title)	Director
Rank (#1-30)		
29	Sakuran	Ninagawa Mika

No *jidaigeki* in the list for 2008.

<u>2009</u>	Original Movie Title (English Title)	Director
Rank (#1-29)		
21	Kamui Gaiden (Kamui)	Sai Yōichi
28	Zen	Takahashi Banmei

<u>2010</u>	Original Movie Title (English Title)	Director
Rank (#1-29)		
4	Jūsan-nin no shikaku (13 Assassins)	Miike Takashi
7	Hisshiken torisashi (Sword of Desperation)	Hirayama Hideyuki
11	Bushi no kakeibo (Abacus and Sword)	Morita Yoshimitsu
19	Saigo no Chūshingura (The Last Ronin/The Last Chushingura)	Sugita Shigemichi

<u>2011</u>	Original Movie Title (English Title)	Director
Rank (#1-29)		
19	Ichimei (Hara-Kiri: Death of a Samurai)	Miike Takashi

No *jidaigeki* in the list for 2012.